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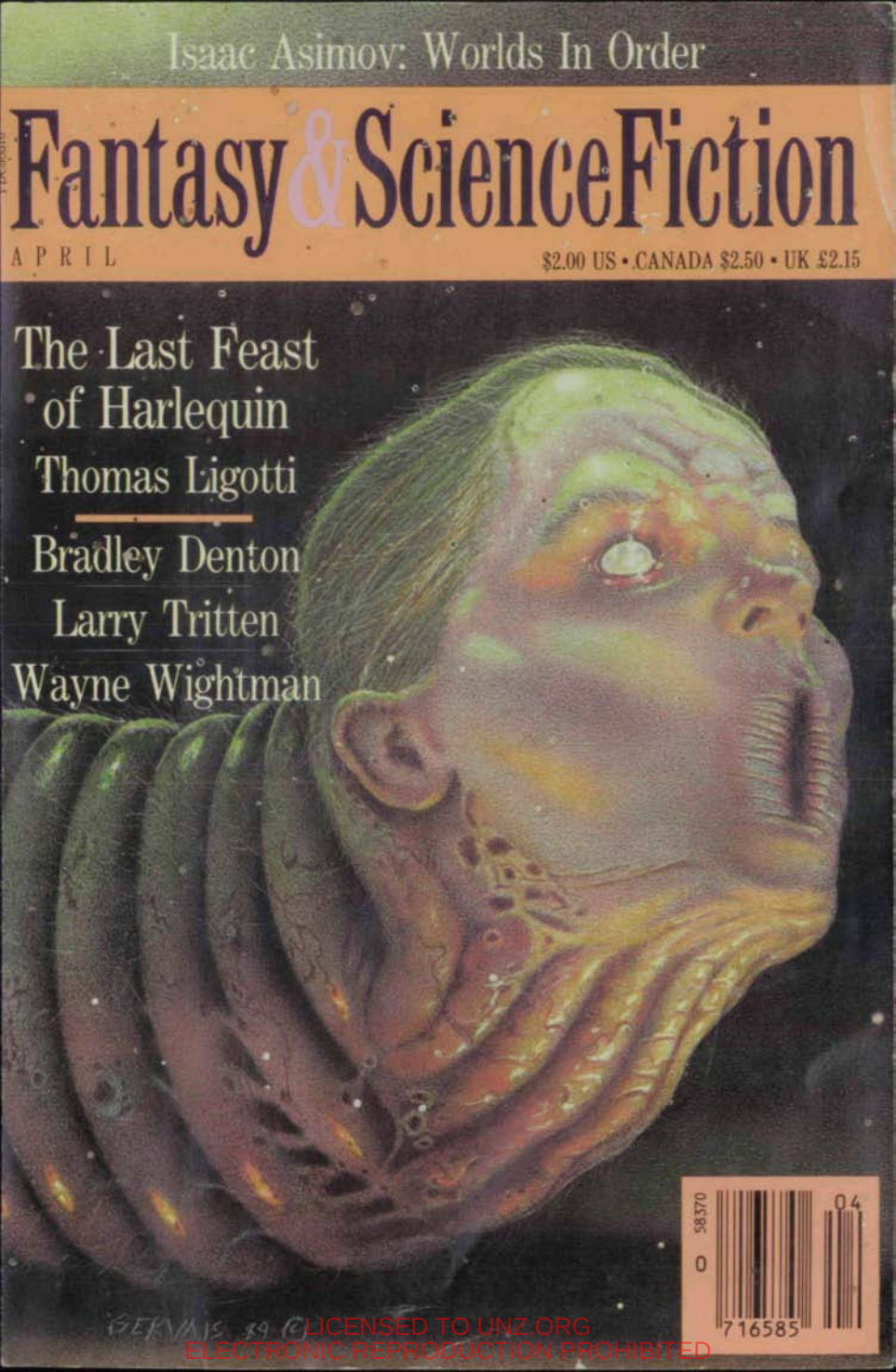

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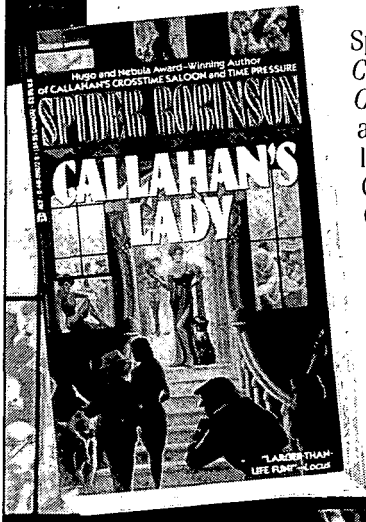

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Thomas Ligotti's stories have appeared in several magazines and anthologies, including Ramsey Campbell's STORIES THAT SCARED ME and Douglas Winter's PRIME EVIL. This tale — concerning the remarkable events surrounding an annual festival in the midwestern town of Mirocaw — is not long on violence or gore. But it is one of the most menacing and convincing weird tales we have ever read, an accomplished job of storytelling that makes a nightmare seem real.

THE LAST FEAST OF HARLEQUIN

By Thomas Ligotti

I

MY INTEREST IN THE town of Mirocaw was first aroused when I heard that an annual festival was held there that promised to include, to some extent, the participation of clowns among its other elements of pagentry. A former colleague of mine, who is now attached to the anthropology deparment of a distant university, had read one of my recent articles ("The Clown Figure in American Media," *Journal of Popular Culture*), and wrote to me that he vaguely remembered reading or being told of a town somewhere in the state that held a kind of "Fool's Feast" every year thinking that this might be pertinent to my peculiar line of study. It was, of course, more pertinent than he had reason to think, both to my academic aims in this area and to my personal pursuits.

Aside from my teaching, I had for some years been engaged in various anthropological projects with the primary ambition of articulating the

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significance of the clown figure in diverse cultural contexts. Every year for the past twenty years, I have attended the pre-Lenten festivals that are held in various places throughout the southern United States. Every year I learned something more concerning the esoterics of celebration. In these studies I was an enthusiastic participant — along with playing my part as an anthropologist, I also took a place behind the clownish masks myself. And I cherished this role as I did nothing else in my life. To me the title of Clown has always carried connotations of a noble sort. I was an adroit jester, strangely enough, and had always taken pride in the skills I worked so diligently to develop.

I wrote to the State Department of Recreation, indicating what information I desired, and exposing an enthusiastic urgency that came naturally to me on this topic. Many weeks later I received a tan envelope imprinted with a government logo. Inside was a pamphlet that cataloged all of the various seasonal festivities of which the state was officially aware, and I noted in passing that there were as many in late autumn and winter as in the warmer seasons. A letter inserted within the pamphlet explained to me that, according to their voluminous records, no festivals held in the town of Mirocaw had been officially registered. Their files, nonetheless, could be placed at my disposal if I should wish to research this or similar matters in connection with some definite project. At the time this offer was made, I was already laboring under so many professional and personal burdens that, with a weary hand, I simply deposited the envelope and its contents in a drawer, never to be consulted again.

Some months later, however, I made an impulsive digression from my responsibilities and, rather haphazardly, became engaged in a new project. This happened as I was driving north one afternoon in late summer with the intention of examining some journals in the holdings of a library at another university. Once out of the city limits, the scenery changed to sunny fields and farms, diverting my thoughts from the signs that I passed along the highway. Nevertheless, the subconscious scholar in me must have been regarding these with studious care. The name of a town loomed in my vision. Instantly the scholar retrieved certain records from some deep mental drawer, and I was faced with making a few hasty calculations as to whether there was enough time and motivation for an investigative side trip. But the exit along the highway was even hastier in making its appearance, and I soon found myself leaving the highway, recalling the

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road sign's promise that the town was no more than seven miles east.

These seven miles included several turns, the forced taking of a temporarily alternate route, and a destination not even visible until a steep rise had been fully ascended. On the descent another helpful sign informed me that I was within the city limits of Mirocaw. Some scattered houses on the outskirts of the town were the first structures I encountered. Beyond them the numerical highway became Townshend Street, the main avenue of Mirocaw.

The town impressed me as being much larger once I was within its limits than it had appeared from the summit of the hill just outside. I saw that the general hilliness of the surrounding countryside was also an internal feature of Mirocaw. Here, though, the effect was different. The parts of the town did not look as if they adhered very well to one another. This was partly due to the irregularly hilly sections upon which various buildings of the town so antagonistically stood. Behind some of the old stores in the business district, steeply roofed houses had been erected on a sudden incline, their peaks appearing at an extraordinary elevation above the lower buildings. I should say that perhaps the disharmonies of Mirocaw are more acutely affecting my imagination in retrospect than they were on that first day, when I was primarily concerned with locating the city hall or some other center of information.

I pulled around a corner and parked. Sliding over to the other side of the seat, I rolled down the window and called to a passerby: "Excuse me, sir," I said. The man, who was shabbily dressed and very old, paused for a moment and stared at me without approaching the car. Though he had apparently responded to my call, his vacant expression did not betray the least awareness of my presence, and for a moment I thought it just a coincidence that he halted on the sidewalk at the same time I addressed him. His eyes were focused somewhere beyond me with a weary and imbecilic gaze. After a few moments, he continued on his way, and I said nothing to call him back, even though at the last second, his face began to appear dimly familiar. Someone else finally came along who was able to direct me to the Mirocaw City Hall and Community Center.

Inside, I stood at a counter behind which some people were working at desks and walking up and down a back hallway. On one wall was a poster for the state lottery: a jack-in-the-box with both hands grasping green bills. After a few moments, a tall, middle-aged woman came over to the counter.

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"Can I help you?" she asked in a neutral, bureaucratic voice.

I explained that I had heard about the festival — saying nothing about being a nosy academic — and asked if she could provide me with further information or direct me to someone who could.

"Do you mean the one held in the winter?" she asked.

"How many of them are there?"

"Just that one."

"I suppose, then, that's the one I mean." I smiled as if sharing a joke with her.

Without another word, she walked off into the back hallway. While she was absent, I exchanged glances with several of the people behind the counter who periodically looked up at me from their work.

"There you are," she said when she returned, handing me a piece of paper that looked like the product of the office copy machine. *Please Come to the Fun,* it said in large letters. *Parades,* it went on, *Street Masquerade, Bands, The Winter Raffle,* and *The Coronation of the Winter Queen.* The page continued with the mention of a number of other miscellaneous festivities. I read the words again. There was something about that imploring little "please" at the top of the announcement that made the whole affair seem like a charity function.

"When is it held? It doesn't say when the festival takes place."

"Most people already know that." She reappropriated the announcement from my hands and wrote something at the bottom. When she gave it back to me, I saw "Dec. 19-21" written in blue-green ink. I was immediately struck by an odd sense of scheduling on the part of the festival committee. There was, of course, some anthropological and historical precedent for holding festivities around the winter solstice, but it did not seem entirely practical.

"If you don't mind my asking, don't these days somewhat conflict with the regular holiday season? I mean, most people have enough going on at that time."

"It's just tradition," she said, as if invoking some venerable ancestry behind her words.

"That's very interesting," I said, as much to myself as to her.

"Is there anything else?" she asked.

"Yes. Could you tell me if this festival has anything to do with clowns? I see there's something about a masquerade —"

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"Yes, of course there are some people in . . . costumes. I've never been in that position myself . . . that is, yes, there are clowns of a sort."

At that point my interest was definitely aroused, but I was not sure how much further I wanted to pursue it. I noncommittally thanked her for her help, and asked the best way to get back to the interstate, not anxious to retrace the labyrinthine route by which I had entered the town. I walked back to my car with a whole flurry of half-formed questions, and as many vague and conflicting answers, cluttering my mind.

The directions the woman gave me necessitated passing through the south end of Mirocaw. There were not many people moving about in this section of town. Those that I did see, shuffling lethargically down a block of battered storefronts, exhibited the same sort of forlorn expression and manner as the old man from whom I had asked directions earlier. I must have been passing through a central artery of this area, for on each side of me stretched street after street of poorly tended yards, and houses bowed with age and indifference. When I came to a stop at a street corner, one of the citizens of the slum passed in front of my car. This lean, morose, and epicene person turned and, without really looking directly at me, smiled or sneered ambiguously from one corner of a taut little mouth. After progressing a few streets farther, I came to a road that led back to the interstate. I felt detectably more comfortable as soon as I found myself traveling once again through the expanses of sun-drenched farmlands.

I reached the library with more than enough time for my research, and so I decided to make a scholarly detour to see what material I could find that might illuminate the winter festival held in Mirocaw. The library included in its holdings the entire run of the *Mirocaw Courier*, which the librarian told me was the major newspaper in the county that included the town within its borders. I thought this would be an excellent place to start. I soon found, however, that there was no handy way in which to research information from this newspaper, and I did not want to engage in a blind search for articles concerning a specific subject.

I next turned to the more organized resources of the newspapers for the larger cities located in the same general area. I uncovered very little about the town, and almost nothing concerning its festival, except in one general article on annual events in the state that erroneously attributed to Mirocaw a "large Middle Eastern community" that every spring hosted a kind of ethnic jamboree. From what I had already observed, and from what

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I subsequently learned, the citizens of Mirocaw were solidly midwestern American, the probable descendants in a direct line from some enterprising pack of New Englanders of the past century. There was one brief item devoted to a Mirocavian event, but this merely turned out to be an obituary notice for an old woman who had quietly taken her life around Christmastime. Thus, I returned home that day all but empty-handed on the subject of Mirocaw.

However, it was not long afterward that I received another letter from the former colleague of mine who had first led me to seek out Mirocaw and its festival. As it happened, he rediscovered the article that caused him to stir my interest in a local "Fool's Feast." This article had its sole appearance in an obscure festschrift of anthropology studies published in Amsterdam twenty years ago. Most of these papers were in Dutch, a few in German, and only one was in English: "The Last Feast of Harlequin: Preliminary Notes on a Local Festival." It was exciting, of course, finally to be able to read this study, but even more exciting was the name of its author: Dr. Raymond Thoss.

II

BEFORE PROCEEDING any further, I should mention something about Thoss, and inevitably about myself. Over two decades ago, at my alma mater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Thoss was a professor of mine. Long before playing a role in the events I am about to describe, he was already one of the most important figures in my life. A striking personality, he inevitably influenced everyone who came in contact with him. I remember his lectures on social anthropology, how he turned that dim room into the brilliant and many-ringed stage of a profound circus. He moved in an uncannily brisk manner. When he swept his arm around to indicate some common term on the blackboard behind him, one felt he was presenting nothing less than an item of fantastic qualities and secret value. When he replaced his hand in the pocket of his old jacket, this fleeting magic was once again stored away in its well-worn pouch, to be retrieved at the sorcerer's discretion. We sensed he was teaching us more than we could possibly learn, and that he himself was in possession of greater and deeper knowledge than he could possibly impart. On one occasion I summoned up the audacity to offer an interpreta-

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tion — which was somewhat opposed to his own — regarding the tribal clowns of the Hopi Indians. I implied that personal experience as an amateur clown and special devotion to this study provided me with an insight possibly more valuable than his own. It was then he disclosed, casually and very obiter dicta, that he had actually acted in the role of one of the masked tribal fools and had celebrated with them the dance of the kachinas. In revealing these facts, however, he somehow managed not to add to the humiliation I had already inflicted upon myself. And for this I was grateful to him.

Thoss's activities were such that he sometimes became the object of gossip or romanticized speculation. He was a field-worker par excellence, and his ability to insinuate himself into exotic cultures and situations, thereby gaining insights where other anthropologists merely gathered data, was renowned. At various times in his career, there had been rumors of his having "gone native" á la the Frank Hamilton Cushing legend. There were hints, which were not always irresponsible or cheaply glamorized, that he was involved in projects of a freakish sort, many of which focused on New England. It is a fact that he spent six months posing as a mental patient at an institution in western Massachusetts, gathering information on the "culture" of the psychically disturbed. When his book *Winter Solstice: The Longest Night of a Society* was published, the general opinion was that it was disappointingly subjective and impressionistic, and, aside from a few moving but "poetically obscure" observations, there was nothing at all to give it value. Those who defended Thoss claimed he was both less than an anthropologist, in the sense that much of his work emphasized his own mind and feelings, and more than one, meaning that his experience had penetrated to a rich core of hard data that he had yet to disclose in objective discourse. As a student of Thoss, I tended to support this latter estimation of him. For a variety of rational and nonrational reasons, I believed Thoss capable of touching hitherto inaccessible regions of human existence. So it was gratifying at first that this article titled "The Last Feast of Harlequin" seemed to uphold the Thoss mystique, and in an area I personally found captivating.

Much of the content of the article I did not immediately comprehend, given its author's characteristic and often strategic obscurities. On first reading, the most interesting aspect of this brief study — the "notes" encompassed only twenty pages — was the general mood of the piece.

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Thoss's egocentricities were definitely present in these pages, but only as a struggling inner force that was definitely contained — incarcerated, I might say — by the somber rhythmic movements of his prose and by some glossy reference he occasionally called upon. Two references in particular shared a common theme to some extent. One was a quotation from Poe's "The Conqueror Worm," which Thoss employed as a rather sensational epigraph. The point of the epigraph, however, was nowhere echoed in the text of the article save in another passing reference. Thoss brought up the well-known genesis of the modern Christmas celebration, which of course descends from the Roman Saturnalia. Then, making it clear he had not yet observed the Mirocaw festival and had gathered its nature only from various informants, he established that it, too, contained many, even more overt, elements of the Saturnalia. Next he made what seemed to me a trivial and purely linguistic observation, one that had less to do with his main course of argument than it did with the equally peripheral Poe epigraph. He briefly mentioned that an early sect of Syrian Gnostics called themselves "Saturnians" and believed, among other religious heresies, that mankind was created by angels who were in turn created by the Supreme Unknown. The angels, however, did not possess the power to make their creation an erect being, and for a time he crawled upon the earth like a worm. Later the Creator remedied this grotesque state of affairs. At the time I supposed that the symbolic correspondences of mankind's origins and ultimate condition being associated with worms, combined with a year-end festival recognizing the winter death of the earth, was the gist of this Thossian "insight," a poetic but scientifically valueless observation.

Other observations he made on the Mirocaw festival were strictly etic; in other words, they were based on secondhand sources, hearsay testimony. Even at that juncture, however, I felt Thoss knew more than he disclosed; and, as I later discovered, he had indeed included information on certain aspects of Mirocaw that suggested he was already in possession of several keys that for the moment he was keeping securely in his own pocket. By then I myself possessed a most revealing fragment of knowledge. A note to the "Harlequin" article apprised the reader that the piece was only a fragment in rude form of a more wide-ranging work in preparation. This work was never seen by the world. My former professor had not published anything since his withdrawal from academic circulation some

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twenty years ago. Now I suspected where he had gone.

For the man from whom I had asked directions on the streets of Mirocaw, the man with the disconcertingly lethargic gaze, had very much resembled a superannuated version of Dr. Raymond Thoss.

III

AND NOW I have a confession to make. Despite my reasons for being enthusiastic about Mirocaw and its mysteries, not to mention its relationship to both Thoss and my own deepest concerns as a scholar, I contemplated the days ahead of me with no more than a feeling of frigid numbness and often with a sense of profound depression. Yet I had no reason to be surprised at this emotional state, which had little relevance to the outward events in my life, but were determined by inward conditions that worked according to their own, quite enigmatic, seasons and cycles. For many years, at least since my university days, I have suffered from this dark malady, this recurrent despondency in which I would become buried when it came time for the earth to grow cold and bare and the skies heavy with shadows. Nevertheless, I pursued my plans, though somewhat mechanically, to visit Mirocaw during its festival days, for I superstitiously hoped that this activity might diminish the weight of my seasonal lethargy. In Mirocaw would be parades and parties and the opportunity to play the clown once again.

For weeks in advance, I practiced my art, even perfecting a new feat of juggling magic, which was my special forte in foolery. I had my costumes cleaned, purchased fresh makeup, and was ready. I received permission from the university to cancel some of my classes prior to the holiday, explaining the nature of my project and the necessity of arriving in the town a few days before the festival began, in order to do some preliminary research, establish informants, and so on. Actually, my plan was to postpone any formal inquiry until after the festival, and to involve myself beforehand as much as possible in its activities. I would, of course, keep a journal during this time.

There was one resource I did want to consult, however. Specifically, I returned to that outstate library to examine those issues of the *Mirocaw Courier* dating from December two decades ago. One story in particular confirmed a point Thoss made in the "Harlequin" article, though the event

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it chronicled must have taken place after Thoss had written his study.

The *Courier* story appeared two weeks after the festival had ended for that year, and was concerned with the disappearance of a woman named Elizabeth Beadle, the wife of Samuel Beadle, a hotel owner in Mirocaw. The county authorites speculated that this was another instance of the "holiday suicides" that seemed to occur with inordinate seasonal regularity in the Mirocaw region. Thoss documented this situation in his "Harlequin" article, though I suspected that today these deaths would be neatly categorized under the heading "seasonal affective disorder." In any case, the authorities searched a half-frozen lake near the outskirts of Mirocaw where they had found many successful suicides in years past. This year, however, no body was discovered. Alongside the article was a picture of Elizabeth Beadle. Even in the grainy microfilm reproduction, one could detect a certain vibrancy and vitality in Mrs. Beadle's face. That a hypothesis of "holiday suicide" should be so readily posited to explain her disappearance seemed strange and in some way unjust.

Thoss, in his brief article, wrote that every year there occurred changes of a moral or spiritual cast that seemed to affect Mirocaw along with the usual winter metamorphosis. He was not precise about its origin or nature, but stated, in typically mystic fashion, that the effect of this "subseason" on the town was conspicuously negative. In addition to the number of suicides actually accomplished during this time, there was also a rise in treatment of "hypochondriacal" conditions, which was how the medical men of twenty years past characterized these cases in discussions with Thoss. This state of affairs would gradually worsen and finally reach a climax during the days scheduled for the Mirocaw festival. Thoss speculated that given the secretive nature of small towns, the situation was probably even more intensely pronounced than casual investigation could reveal.

The connection between the festival and this insidious subseasonal climate in Mirocaw was a point on which Thoss did not come to any rigid conclusions. He did write, nevertheless, that these two "climatic aspects" had had a parallel existence in the town's history as far back as available records could document. A late-nineteenth-century history of Mirocaw County speaks of the town by its original name of New Colstead, and castigates the townspeople for holding a "ribald and soulless feast" to the exclusion of normal Christmas observances. (Thoss comments that the

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historian had mistakenly fused two distinct aspects of the season, their actual relationship being essentially antagonistic.) The "Harlequin" article did not trace the festival to its earliest appearance (this may not have been possible), though Thoss emphasized the New England origins of Mirocaw's founders. The festival, therefore, was one imported from this region, and could reasonably be extended at least a century; that is, if it had not been brought over from the Old World, in which case its roots would become indefinite until further research could be done. Surely Thoss's allusion to the Syrian Gnostics suggested the latter possibility could not entirely be ruled out.

But it seemed to be the festival's source in New England that nourished Thoss's speculations. He wrote of this patch of geography as if it were an acceptable place to end the search. For him, the very words "New England" seemed to be stripped of all traditional connotations and had come to imply nothing less than a gateway to all lands, both known and suspected, and even to ages beyond the civilized history of the region. Having been educated partly in New England, I could somewhat understand this sentimental exaggeration, for indeed there are places that seem archaic beyond chronological measure, appearing to transcend relative standards of time and achieving a kind of absolute antiquity that cannot be logically fathomed. But how this vague suggestion related to a small town in the Midwest, I could not imagine. Thoss himself observed that the residents of Mirocaw did not betray any mysteriously primitive consciousness. On the contrary, they appeared superficially unaware of the genesis of their winter merrymaking. That such a tradition had endured through the years, however, even eclipsing the conventional Christmas holiday, revealed a profound awareness of the festival's meaning and function.

I cannot deny that what I had learned about the Mirocaw festival did inspire a trite sense of mystery, especially given the involvement of such an important figure from my past as Thoss. It was the first time in my academic career that I knew myself to be better suited than anyone else to discern the true meaning of scattered data, even if I could attribute this special authority only to chance circumstances.

Nevertheless, as I sat in that library on a morning in mid-December, I doubted for a moment the wisdom of setting out for Mirocaw rather than returning home, where the more familiar rite de passage of winter depression awaited me. My original scheme was to avoid the cyclical blues the

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season held for me, but it seemed this was also a part of the history of Mirocaw, only on a much larger scale. My emotional instability, however, was exactly what qualified me most for the particular fieldwork ahead, though I did not take pride or consolation in the fact. And to retreat would have been to deny myself an opportunity that might never offer itself again. In retrospect, there seems to have been no fortuitous resolution to the decision I had to make. As it happened, I went ahead to the town.

IV

JUST PAST noon on December 18, I started driving toward Mirocaw. A blur of dull, earthen-colored scenery passed by me. The snowfalls of late autumn had been sparse, and only a few white patches appeared in the stiff, dead grass of the fields along the highway. The clouds, which also looked stiff, were gray and abundant. In the mesh of bare branches above, there occasionally clung a few black, ragged clumps that were abandoned nests. I thought I saw blackbirds skittering over the road ahead, but they were leaves, and I passed through them.

I drove into Mirocaw from the south, entering the town from the direction I had left it on my visit the previous summer. This took me once again through that part of town that seemed to be on the other side of some great invisible line dividing the desired areas from the nondesirable. As lurid as this section had appeared to me under the summer sun, in the thin light of that winter afternoon, it degenerated into a pale phantom of itself. The frail stores and starved-looking houses suggested a paradoxical limbo existing between the material and nonmaterial worlds, with one sardonically wearing the mask of the other. I saw a few bowed pedestrians who turned as I passed by, though seemingly not *because* I passed by, making my way up to the main street of Mirocaw.

Driving up the steep rise of Townshend Street, I found the sights there comparatively welcoming. The rolling avenues of the town were in readiness for the festival. Streetlights had their poles raveled with evergreen, the fresh boughs proudly conspicuous in a barren season. On the doors of many of the businesses on Townshend were holly wreaths, equally green but observably plastic. However, although there was nothing unusual in this traditional greenery of the season, it soon became apparent to me that Mirocaw had quite abandoned itself to this particular symbol of Yuletide.

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It was garishly in evidence everywhere. The windows of stores and houses were framed in green lights, green streamers hung down from storefront awnings, and the beacons of the Red Rooster Bar were peacock-green floodlights. I supposed the residents of Mirocaw desired these decorations, but the effect was one of excess. An eerie emerald haze permeated the town, and faces looked slightly reptilian.

At the time I assumed that the prodigious evergreen, holly wreaths, and colored lights (if only of a single color) demonstrated an emphasis on the vegetable symbols of the Nordic Yuletide that was in some way connected with the festival. In his "Harlequin" article, Thoss wrote of the pagan aspect of Mirocaw's festival, likening it to the ritual of a fertility cult, with probable connections to chthonic divinities at some time in the past. But Thoss had mistaken, as I had, what was only part of the festival's significance for the whole.

The hotel at which I had made reservations was located on Townshend. It was an old building of brown brick, with an arched doorway and a pathetic coping intended to convey an impression of classicism. I found a parking space in front and left my suitcases in the car.

When I first entered the hotel lobby, it was empty. I thought that perhaps the Mirocaw festival would have attracted enough visitors to at least bolster the business of its only hotel, but it seemed I was mistaken. Tapping a little bell, I leaned on the desk and turned to look at a small, traditionally decorated Christmas tree on a table near the entranceway. It was complete with shiny, egg-fragile bulbs; miniature candy canes; flat, laughing Santas with arms wide; a star on top nodding awkwardly against the delicate shoulder of an upper branch; and colored lights that bloomed out of flower-shaped sockets. For some reason this seemed to me a sorry little piece.

"May I help you?" said a young woman arriving from a room adjacent to the lobby.

I must have been staring rather intently at her, for she looked away and seemed quite uneasy. I could hardly imagine what to say to her or how to explain what I was thinking. In person she immediately radiated a chilling brilliance of manner and expression. But if this woman had not committed suicide twenty years before, as the newspaper article had suggested, neither had she aged in that time.

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"Sarah," called a masculine voice from the invisible heights of a stairway. A tall, middle-aged man came down the steps. "I thought you were in your room," said the man, whom I took to be Samuel Beadle. Sarah, not Elizabeth, Beadle glanced sideways in my direction to indicate to her father that she was conducting the business of the hotel. Beadle apologized to me, and then excused the two of them for a moment while they went off to one side to continue their exchange.

I smiled and pretended everything was normal, while trying to remain within earshot of their conversation. They spoke in tones that suggested their conflict was a familiar one: Beadle's overprotective concern with his daughter's whereabouts, and Sarah's frustrated understanding of certain restrictions placed upon her. The conversation ended, and Sarah ascended the stairs, turning for a moment to give me a facial pantomime of apology for the unprofessional scene that had just taken place.

"Now, sir, what can I do for you?" Beadle asked, almost demanded.

"Yes, I have a reservation. Actually, I'm a day early, if that doesn't present a problem." I gave the hotel the benefit of the doubt that its business might have been secretly flourishing.

"No problem at all, sir," he said, presenting me with the registration forms, and then a brass-colored key dangling from a small black plastic disk bearing the number 44.

"Luggage?"

"Yes, it's in my car."

"I'll give you a hand with that."

While Beadle was settling me in my fourth-floor room, it seemed an opportune moment to broach the subject of the festival, the holiday suicides, and perhaps, depending upon his reaction, the fate of his wife. I needed a respondent who had lived in the town for a good many years and who could enlighten me about the attitude of Mirocavians toward their season of sea-green lights.

"This is just fine," I said about the clean but somber room. "Nice view. I can see the bright green lights of Mirocaw just fine from up here. Is the town usually all decked out like this? For the festival, I mean."

"Yes, sir, for the festival," he replied mechanically.

"I imagine you'll probably be getting quite a few of us out-of-towners in the next couple days."

"Could be. Is there anything else?"

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"Yes, there is. I wonder if you could tell me something about the festivities."

"Such as. . . ."

"Well, you know, the clowns and so forth."

"Only clowns here are the ones that're . . . well, picked out, I suppose you would say."

"I don't understand."

"Excuse me, sir. I'm very busy right now. Is there anything else?"

I could think of nothing at the moment to perpetuate our conversation. Beadle wished me a good stay and left.

I unpacked my suitcases. In addition to regular clothing, I had also brought along some items from my clown's wardrobe. Beadle's comments that clowns were "picked out" here left me wondering exactly what purpose these street masqueraders served in the festival. The clown figure had had so many meanings in different times and cultures. The jolly, well-loved joker familiar to most people is actually but one aspect of this protean creature. Madmen, hunchbacks, amputees, and other abnormals were once considered natural clowns; they were selected to fulfill a comic role that could allow others to see them as ludicrous rather than as terrible reminders of the forces of disorder in the world. But sometimes a cheerless jester was required to draw attention to this same disorder, as in the case of King Lear's morbid and honest fool, who of course was eventually hanged, and so much for his clownish wisdom. Clowns have often had ambiguous and sometimes contradictory roles to play. Thus, I knew enough not to brashly jump into costume and cry out, "Here I am again!"

That first day in Mirocaw, I did not stray far from the hotel. I read and rested for a few hours, and then ate at a nearby diner. Through the window beside my table, I watched the winter night turn the soft green glow of the town into a harsh and almost totally new color as it contrasted with the darkness. The streets of Mirocaw seemed to me unusually busy for a small town at evening. Yet it was not the kind of activity one normally sees before an approaching Christmas holiday. This was not a crowd of bustling shoppers loaded with bright bags of presents. Their arms were empty, their hands shoved deep in their pockets against the cold, which nevertheless had not driven them to the solitude of their presumably warm houses. I watched them enter and exit store after store without buying; the merchants still remained open late, and even the places that were

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closed had left their neons illuminated. The faces that passed the window of the restaurant were possibly just stiffened by the cold, I thought; frozen into deep frowns and nothing else. In the window I saw the reflection of my own face. It was not the face of an adept clown; it was slack and flabby and at that moment seemed the face of someone less than alive. Outside was the town of Mirocaw, its street dipping and rising with a lunatic severity, its citizens packing the sidewalks, its heart bathed in green: as promising a field of professional and personal challenge as I had ever encountered — and I was bored to the point of dread. I hurried back to my hotel room.

"Mirocaw has another coldness within its cold," I wrote in my journal that night. "Another set of buildings and streets that exists behind the visible town's facade like a world of disgraceful back alleys." I went on like this for about a page, across which I finally engraved a big "X." Then I went to bed.

In the morning I left my car at the hotel and walked toward the main business district a few blocks away. Mingling with the good people of Mirocaw seemed like the proper thing to do at that point in my scientific sojourn. But as I began laboriously walking up Townshend (the sidewalks were cramped with wandering pedestrians), a glimpse of someone suddenly replaced my haphazard plan with a more specific and immediate one. Through the crowd and about fifteen paces ahead was my goal.

"Dr. Thoss," I called.

His head almost seemed to turn and look back in response to my shout, but I could not be certain. I pushed past several warmly wrapped bodies and green-scarfed necks, only to find that my object appeared to be maintaining the same distance from me, though I did not know if this was being done deliberately or not. At the next corner, the dark-coated Thoss abruptly turned right onto a steep street that led downward directly toward the dilapidated south end of Mirocaw. When I reached the corner, I looked down the sidewalk and could see him very clearly from above. I also saw how he managed to stay so far ahead of me in a mob that had impeded my own progress. For some reason the people on the sidewalk made room so that he could move past them easily without the usual jostling of bodies. It was not a dramatic physical avoidance, though it seemed nonetheless intentional. Fighting the tight fabric of the throng, I continued to follow Thoss, losing and regaining sight of him.

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By the time I reached the bottom of this street, the crowd had thinned out considerably, and after walking a block or so farther, I found myself practically a lone pedestrian pacing behind a distant figure that I hoped was still Thoss. He was now walking quite swiftly and in a way that seemed to acknowledge my pursuit of him, though, really, it felt as if he were leading me as much as I was chasing him. I called his name a few more times at a volume he could not have failed to hear, assuming that deafness was not one of the changes to have come over him; he was, after all, not a young man, nor even a middle-aged one any longer.

Thoss suddenly crossed in the middle of the street. He walked a few more steps and entered a signless brick building between a liquor store and a repair shop of some kind. In the "Harlequin" article, Thoss had mentioned that the people living in this section of Mirocaw maintained their own businesses, and that these were patronized almost exclusively by residents of the area. I could believe this when I looked at these little sheds of commerce, for they had the same badly weathered appearance as their clientele. The formidable shoddiness of these buildings notwithstanding, I followed Thoss into the plain brick shell of what had been, or possibly still was, a diner.

Inside, it was unusually dark. Even before my eyes made the adjustment, I sensed that this was not a thriving restaurant cozily cluttered with chairs and tables — as was the establishment where I had eaten the night before — but a place with only a few disarranged objects, like an abandoned storeroom, and very cold. It seemed colder, in fact, than the winter streets outside.

"Dr. Thoss?" I called toward a lone table near the center of the long room. Perhaps four or five were sitting around the table, with some others blending into the dimness behind them. Scattered across the top of the table were some books and loose papers. Seated there was an old man indicating something in the pages before him, but it was not Thoss. Beside him were two youths whose fresh features distinguished them from the surliness of the others. I approached the table, and they all looked up at me. None of them showed a glimmer of emotion except the two boys, who exchanged worried and guilt-ridden glances with each other, as if they had just been discovered in some shameful act. They both suddenly burst from the table and ran into the dark background, where a light appeared briefly as they exited by a back door.

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They slid slowly toward me in a wormlike mass, their eyes directed nowhere.

"I'm sorry," I said diffidently. "I thought I saw someone I knew come in here."

They said nothing. Out of a back room, others began to emerge, no doubt interested in the source of the commotion. In a few moments, the room was crowded with these tramplike figures, all of them gazing emptily in the dimness. I was not at this point frightened of them; at least, I was not afraid they would do me any physical harm. Actually, I felt as if it was quite within my power to pummel them easily into submission, their mousy faces almost inviting a succession of firm blows. But there were so many of them.

They slid slowly toward me in a wormlike mass. Their eyes seemed directed nowhere, and I even wondered a moment if they were aware of my presence. Nevertheless, I was the center upon which their lethargic shuffling converged, their shoes scuffing softly along the bare floor. I began to deliver a number of hasty inanities as they continued to crowd toward me, their weak and unexpectedly odorless bodies pressing against mine. I understood now why the people along the sidewalks seemed to instinctively avoid Thoss. Unseen legs seemed to be entangling with mine; I staggered and then regained my balance. This sudden movement aroused me from a kind of mesmeric daze that I must have fallen into without being aware of it. I had intended to leave the dark room long before events there had reached such a ludicrous juncture, but for some reason could not focus my intentions strongly enough to cause myself to act. My mind had been drifting farther away as these slavish things approached, and finally I realized the potential danger of the situation. In a sudden surge of panic, I pushed through their soft ranks and was outside.

The open air revived me to my former alertness, and I immediately started pacing swiftly up the hill. I was not really sure anymore that I had not simply imagined what had seemed, and at the same time did not seem, like a perilous moment. Had one of them tried to trip me deliberately, or were they trying merely to intimidate me? As I reached the green-glazed main street of Mirocaw, I really could not be sure what had just happened.

The sidewalks were still jammed with a multitude of pedestrians, but

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now they seemed to be moving and chattering in a livelier way. There was a kind of electricity that could be attributed only to the imminent festivities. A group of young men had begun celebrating prematurely, and strode noisily across the street at midpoint, obviously intoxicated. From the laughter and joking among the still-sober citizens, I gathered that, Mardi Gras style, public drunkenness was within the traditions of this winter festival. I looked for anything to indicate the beginnings of the "Street Masquerade," but saw nothing. No brightly garbed Harlequins or snow-white Pierrots. Were the ceremonies even now in preparation for the "coronation of the Winter Queen?" I wondered. "The Winter Queen," I wrote in my journal. "Figure of fertility invested with symbolic powers of revival and prosperity. Elected in the manner of a high school prom queen. Check for possible consort figure in the form of a representative from the underworld."

In the predarkness hours of December 19, I sat in my hotel room and wrote and thought and organized. I did not feel too badly, all things considered. The holiday excitement that was steadily rising in the streets below my window was definitely infecting me. I forced myself to take a short nap in anticipation of a long night. When I awoke, Mirocaw's annual feast had begun.

V

SHOUTING, COMMOTION, carousing. Sleepily, I went to the window and looked out over the town. It seemed all the lights of Mirocaw were shining, save in that section down the hill that became part of the black void of winter. And now the town's greenish tinge was even more pronounced, spreading everywhere like a great green rainbow that had melted from the sky and endured, phosphorescent, into the night. In the streets was the daylight of an artificial spring. The byways of Mirocaw vibrated with activity: on a nearby corner, a brass band blared; marauding cars blew their horns and were sometimes mounted by laughing pedestrians; a man emerged from the Red Rooster Bar, threw up his arms, and crowed. I looked closely at the individual celebrants, searching for the vestments of clowns. Soon, delightedly, I saw them. The costume was red and white, with matching cap, and the face painted a noble alabaster. It almost seemed to be a clownish

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incarnation of the well-known bearded and black-booted Christmas fool.

This particular fool, however, was not receiving the affection and respect usually accorded to a Santa Claus. My poor fellow clown was in the middle of a circle of revelers who were pushing him back and forth from one to the other. The object of this abuse seemed to accept it somewhat willingly, but this little game nevertheless appeared to have humiliation as its purpose. "Only clowns here are the ones that're picked out," echoed Beadle's voice in my memory. "Picked *on*" seemed closer to the truth.

Packing myself in some heavy clothes, I went out into the green gleaming streets. Not far from the hotel, I was stumbled into by a character with a wide blue-and-red grin and bright, baggy clothes. Actually, he had been shoved into me by some youths outside a drugstore.

"See the freak," said an obese and drunken fellow. "See the freak fall."

My first response was anger, and then fear as I saw two others flanking the fat drunk. They walked toward me, and I tensed myself for a confrontation.

"This is a disgrace," one said, the neck of a wine bottle held loosely in his left hand.

But it was not to me they were speaking; it was to the clown, who was now being pushed to the sidewalk. There were three of them who helped him up with a sudden jerk and then splashed wine in his face. They ignored me altogether.

"Let him loose," the fat one said. "Crawl away, freak. Oh, he flies!"

The clown trotted off, becoming lost in the throng.

"Wait a minute," I said to the rowdy trio, who had started stumbling away. I quickly decided that it would probably be futile to ask them to explain what I had just witnessed, especially amid the noise and confusion of the festivities. In my best jovial fashion, I proposed we all go someplace where I could buy them each a drink. They had no objection, and in a short while, we were all squeezed around a table in the Red Rooster.

Over several drinks, I explained to them that I was from out of town, which pleased them no end for some reason. I told them there were some things I did not understand about their festival.

"I don't think there's anything *to* understand," the fat one said. "It's just what you see."

I asked him about the people dressed as clowns.

"Them? They're the freaks. It's their turn this year. Everyone takes

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their turn. Next year it might be mine. Or *yours*," he said, pointing at one of his friends across the table. "And when we find out which one you are—"

"You're not smart enough," said the defiant potential freak.

This was an important point: the fact that individuals who play the clowns remain, or at least attempted to remain, anonymous. This arrangement would help remove inhibitions a resident of Mirocaw might have about abusing his own neighbor or even a family relation. From what I later observed, the extent of this abuse did not go beyond a kind of playful roughhousing. And even so, it was only the occasional group of rowdies who actually took advantage of this aspect of the festival, the majority of the citizens very much content to stay on the sidelines.

As far as being able to illuminate the meaning of this custom, my three young friends were quite useless. To them, it was just amusement, as I imagine it was to the majority of Mirocavians. This was understandable. I suppose the average person would not be able to explain exactly how the profoundly familiar Christmas holiday came to be celebrated in its present form.

I left the bar alone and not unaffected by the drinks I had consumed there. Outside, the general merrymaking continued. Loud music emanated from several quarters. Mirocaw had fully transformed itself from a sedate small town to an enclave of Saturnalia within the dark immensity of a winter night. But Saturn is also the planetary symbol of melancholy and sterility, a clash of opposites contained within that single word. And as I wandered half-drunkenly down the street, I discovered that there was a conflict within the winter festival itself. This discovery indeed appeared to be that secret key that Thoss withheld in his study of the town. Oddly enough, it was through my unfamiliarity with the outward nature of the festival that I came to know its true nature.

I was mingling on the street with the crowd, warmly enjoying the confusion around me, when I saw a strangely designed creature lingering on the corner up ahead. It was one of the Mirocaw clowns. Its clothes were shabby and nondescript, almost in the style of a tramp-type clown, but not humorously exaggerated enough. The face, though, made up for the lackluster costume. I had never seen such a strange conception for a clown's countenance. The figure stood beneath a dim streetlight, and when it turned its head my way, I realized why it seemed familiar. The thin,

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smooth, and pale head; the wide eyes; the oval-shaped features resembling nothing so much as that skull-faced, terror-stricken creature in that famous painting of someone screaming (memory fails me). This clownish imitation rivaled the original in suggesting pathetic realms of abject horror and despair: an inhuman likeness more proper to something under the earth than upon it.

From the moment I saw this creature, I thought of those inhabitants of the ghetto down the hill. There was the same nauseating passivity and languor in its bearing. Perhaps, if I had not been drinking earlier, I would not have been bold enough to take the action I did. I decided to join in one of the upstanding traditions of the winter festival, for it annoyed me to see this morbid impostor of a clown standing up. When I reached the corner. I laughingly pushed myself into the creature — "Whoops!" — who stumbled backward and ended up on the sidewalk. I laughed again and looked around for approval from the festivalers in the vicinity. No one, however, seemed to appreciate or even acknowledge what I had done. They did not laugh with me or point with amusement, but only passed me by, perhaps walking a little faster until they were some distance from this street-corner incident. I realized instantly I had violated some tacit rule of behavior, though I had thought my action well within the common practice. The thought occurred to me that I might even be apprehended and prosecuted for what in other circumstances was certainly a criminal act. I turned around to help the clown back to his feet, hoping somehow to redeem my offense, but the creature was gone. Solemnly, I walked away from the scene of my inadvertent crime and sought other streets away from its witnesses.

Along the various back avenues of Mirocaw I wandered, pausing exhaustedly at one point to sit at the counter of a small sandwich shop that was packed with customers. I ordered a cup of coffee to revive my overly alcoholed system. Warming my hands around the cup and sipping slowly from it, I watched the people outside as they passed the front window. It was well after midnight, but the thick flow of passersby gave no indication that anyone was going home early. A carnival of profiles filed past the window, and I was content simply to sit back and observe, until finally one of these faces made me start. The frightful little clown I had roughed up had just gone past on the sidewalk outside. But although its face was familiar in its ghastly aspect, there was something different

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about it. And I wondered that there should be two such hideous freaks.

Quickly paying the man at the counter, I dashed out to get a second glimpse of the clown, who was now nowhere in sight. The dense crowd kept me from pursuing this figure with any speed, and I wondered how the clown could have made its way so easily ahead of me. Unless the crowd had instinctively allowed this creature to pass unhindered by its massive ranks, as it did for Thoss. In the process of searching for this particular freak, I discovered that interspersed throughout the celebrating populace of Mirocaw, and among the sanctioned festival clowns, there was not one or two, but a considerable number of these pale, wraithlike creatures. And they all drifted along the streets unmolested by even the rowdiest of revelers. I now understood one of the taboos of the festival. These other clowns were not to be disturbed, and should even be avoided, much as were the residents of the slum at the edge of town. Nevertheless, I felt instinctively that the two groups of clowns were somehow identified with each other, even if the ghetto clowns were not welcome at Mirocaw's winter festival. Indeed, they were not simply part of the community and celebrating the season in their own way. To all appearances, this group of melancholy mummers constituted nothing less than an entirely independent festival — a festival within a festival.

Returning to my room, I entered my suppositions into the journal I was keeping for this venture. The following are excerpts:

> There is a superstitiousness displayed by the residents of Mirocaw with regard to these people from the slum section, particularly as they lately appear in those dreadful faces signifying their own festival. What is the relationship between these simultaneous celebrations? Did one precede the other? If so, which? My opinion at this point — and I claim no conclusiveness for it — is that Mirocaw's winter festival is the later manifestation, that it appeared after the festival of those depressingly pallid clowns, in order to cover it up or mitigate its effect. The holiday suicides come to mind, and the subclimate Thoss wrote about, the disappearance of Elizabeth Beadle twenty years ago, and my own experience with this pariah clan existing outside yet within the community. Of my own experience with this emotionally deleterious subseason, I would rather not speak at this time. Still not able to say whether or not my usual winter melancholy is the cause. On the general subject of

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mental health, I must consider Thoss's book about his stay in a psychiatric hospital (in western Mass., almost sure of that. Check on this book & Mirocaw's New England roots). The winter solstice is tomorrow, and it is, of course, the day of the year in which night hours surpass daylight hours by the greatest margin. Note what this has to do with the suicides and a rise in psychic disorder. Recalling Thoss's list of documented suicides in his article, there seemed to be a recurrence of specific family names, as there very likely might be for any kind of data collected in a small town. Among these names was a Beadle or two. Perhaps, then, there is a genealogical basis for the suicides that has nothing to do with Thoss's mystical subclimate, which is a colorful idea to be sure, and one that seems fitting for this town of various outward and inward aspects, but is not a conception that can be substantiated.

One thing that seems certain, however, is the division of Mirocaw into two very distinct types of citizenry, resulting in two festivals and the appearance of similar clowns — a term now used in an extremely loose sense. But there is a connection, and I believe I have some idea of what it is. I said before that the normal residents of the town regard those from the ghetto, and especially their clown figures, with superstition. Yet there is more than that: there is fear, perhaps a kind of hatred — the particular kind of hatred resulting from some powerful and irrational memory. What threatens Mirocaw I think I can very well understand. I recall the incident earlier today in that vacant diner. "Vacant" is the appropriate word here, despite its contradiction of fact. The congregation of that half-lit room formed less a presence than an absence, even considering the oppressive number of them.. Those eyes that did not or could not focus on anything, the pining lassitude of their faces, the lazy march of their feet. I was spiritually drained when I ran out of there. I then understood why these people and their activities are avoided. I cannot question the wisdom of those ancestral Mirocavians who began the tradition of the winter festival and gave the town a pretext for celebration and social intercourse at a time when the consequences of brooding isolation are most severe, those longest and darkest days of the solstice. A mood of Christmas joviality obviously would not be sufficient to counter the menace of this season. But even so, there are still the suicides of individuals who are somehow cut off,

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I imagine, from the vitalizing activities of the festival.

It is the nature of this insidious subseason and of the solstice festival that yearly drifts out from the slums that seem to determine the outward forms of Mirocaw's winter festival: the optimistic greenery in a period of gray dormancy; the fertile promise of the Winter Queen; and, most interesting to my mind, the clowns. The bright clowns of Mirocaw who are treated so badly; they appear to serve as substitute figures for those dark-eyed mummers of the slums. Since the latter are feared for some power or influence they possess, they may still be symbolically confronted and conquered through their counterparts, who are elected for precisely this function. If I am right about this, I wonder to what extent there is a conscious awareness among the town's populace of this indirect show of aggression. Those three I spoke with tonight did not seem to possess much insight beyond seeing that there was a certain amount of robust fun in the festival's tradition. For that matter, how much awareness is there on the other side of these two antagonistic festival's tradition? Too horrible to think of such a thing, but I must wonder if, for all their apparent aimlessness, those inhabitants of the ghetto are not the only ones who know what they are about. No denying that behind those inhumanly limp expressions, there seems to lie a kind of obnoxious intelligence.

Now I realize the confusion of my present state, but as I wobbled from street to street tonight, watching those oval-mouthed clowns, I could not help feeling that all the merrymaking in Mirocaw was somehow allowed only by their sufferance. This, I hope, is no more than a fanciful Thossian intuition, the sort of idea that is curious and thought-provoking without ever seeming to gain the benefit of proof. I know my mind is not entirely lucid, but I feel that it may be possible to penetrate Mirocaw's many complexities and illuminate the hidden side of the festival season. In particular I must look for the significance of the other festival. Is it also some kind of fertility celebration? From what I have seen, the tenor of this celebrating subclan is one of antifertility, if anything. How have they managed to keep from dying out completely over the years? How do they maintain their numbers?

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But I was too tired to formulate any more of my sodden speculations. Falling onto my bed, I soon became lost in dreams of streets and faces.

VI

I WAS, OF course, slightly hung over when I woke up late the next morning. The festival was still going strong, and blaring music outside roused me from a nightmare. It was a parade. A number of floats floated down Townshend, a familiar color predominating. There were theme floats of Pilgrims and Indians, cowboys and Indians, and clowns of an orthodox type. In the middle of it all was the Winter Queen herself, freezing atop an icy throne. She waved in all directions. I even imagined she waved up at my dark window.

In the first few groggy moments of wakefulness, I had no sympathy with my excitation of the previous night. But I discovered that this enthusiasm had merely lain dormant, and soon returned with an even greater intensity. Never before had my mind and senses been so active during this usually inert time of year. At home I would have been playing lugubrious old records and looking out the windows quite a bit. I was terribly grateful in a completely abstract way for my commitment to a meaningful mania. And I was eager to get to work after I had had some breakfast at the coffee shop.

When I got back to my room, I discovered the door was unlocked. And there was something written on the dresser mirror. The writing was red and greasy, as if from a clown's makeup pencil — my own, I realized. I read the legend, or rather, I should say *riddle*, several times: "What buries itself before it is dead?" I looked at it for quite a while, very shaken at how vulnerable my holiday fortifications were. Was this supposed to be a warning of some kind? A threat to the effect that if I persisted in a certain course, I would end up prematurely interred? I would simply have to be careful, I told myself. My resolution was to let nothing deter me from the inspired strategy I had conceived for myself. I wiped the mirror clean, for it was now needed for other purposes.

I spent the rest of the day devising a very special costume and the appropriate face to go with it. I easily shabbied up my overcoat with a torn pocket or two and a complete set of stains. Combined with blue jeans and a pair of rather worn-out shoes, I had a passable costume for a derelict. The

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face, however, was more difficult, for I had to experiment from memory. Remembering the screaming Pierrot in that painting (*The Scream*, I now recall) helped me quite a bit. At nightfall I exited the hotel by the back stairway.

It was strange to walk down the crowded street in this gruesome disguise. Though I thought I would feel conspicuous, the actual experience was very close, I imagined, to one of complete invisibility. No one looked at me as I strolled by, or as they strolled by, or as we strolled by each other. I was a phantom — perhaps the ghost of festivals past, or those yet to come.

I had no clear idea where my disguise would take me that night, only vague expectations of gaining the confidence of my fellow specters and possibly in some way coming to know their secrets. For a while I would simply wander around in that lackadaisical way I had learned from them, following their lead in any way they might indicate. And for the most part, this meant doing almost nothing and doing it silently. If I passed one of my kind on the sidewalk, there was no speaking, no exchange of knowing looks, no recognition at all that I was aware of. We were there on the streets of Mirocaw to create a presence and nothing more. At least, this is how I came to feel about it. As I drifted along with my bodiless invisibility, I felt myself more and more becoming an empty, floating shape, seeing without being seen, and walking without the interference of those grosser creatures who shared my world. It was not an experience completely without interest or even pleasure. The clown's shibboleth of "here we are again" took on a new meaning for me as I felt myself a novitiate of a more rarified order of harlequinry. And very soon the opportunity to make further progress along this path presented itself.

On the other side of the street, going the opposite direction, a pickup truck slowly passed, gently parting a sea of zigging and zagging celebrants. The cargo in the back of this truck was curious, for it was made up entirely of my fellow sectarians. Farther down the street, the truck stopped, and another of them boarded it over the back gate. One block down I saw still another get on. Two blocks down the truck made a U-turn at an intersection and headed in my direction.

I stood at the curb as I had seen the others do. I was not sure that the truck would slow down to pick me up, thinking that somehow they knew I was an imposter. The truck did, however, slow down, almost coming to a

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stop when it reached me. The others were crowded on the floor of the truck bed. Most of them were just staring into nothingness with the usual indifference I had come to expect from their kind. But a few actually glanced at me with some anticipation. For a second I hesitated, not sure I wanted to pursue this ruse any further. At the last moment, some impulse sent me climbing up the back of the truck and squeezing in among the others.

There were only a few more to pick up before the truck headed for the outskirts of Mirocaw and beyond. At first I tried to maintain a clear orientation with respect to the town. But as we took turn after turn through the darkness of narrow, forest-crowded roads, I found myself unable to preserve any sense of direction. The majority of the others in the back of the truck exhibited no apparent awareness of their fellow passengers. Guardedly, I looked from face to ghostly face. A few of them spoke in short, whispered phrases to others close by. I could not make out what they were saying, but the tone of their voices was one of innocent normalcy, as if they were not of the hardened slum herd of Mirocaw. Perhaps, I thought, these were thrill-seekers who had disguised themselves as I had done, or more likely, initiates of some kind, who had received prior instructions at such meetings as I had stumbled onto the day before. It was also likely that those very boys I had frightened into a hasty escape were members of this crew.

The truck was now speeding along a fairly open stretch of country, heading toward those higher hills that surrounded the now-distant town of Mirocaw. The icy wind whipped around us, and I could not keep myself from trembling with cold. This definitely betrayed me as one of the newcomers among the group, for the two bodies that pressed against mine were rigidly still and even seemed to be radiating a frigidity of their own. I glanced ahead at the darkness into which we were rapidly progressing.

We had left all open country behind us now, and the road was enclosed by thick woods. The mass of bodies in the truck leaned into each other as we began traveling up a steep incline. Above us, at the top of the hill, were lights shining somewhere within the woods. When the road leveled off, the truck made an abrupt turn, steering into what I thought was the roadside blackness or a great ditch. There was an unpaved path, however, upon which the truck proceeded toward the glowing in the near distance.

This glowing became brighter and sharper as we approached, flickering

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upon the trees and revealing stark details where there had formerly been only smooth darkness. As the truck pulled into a clearing and came to a stop, I saw a loose assembly of figures, many of which held lanterns that beamed with a dazzling and frosty light. I stood up in the back of the truck to disembark as the others were doing. Glancing around from that height, I saw approximately thirty more of those cadaverous clowns milling about. One of my fellow passengers spied me lingering in the truck, and, in a strangely high-pitched whisper, told me to hurry, explaining something about the "apex of darkness." I thought again about this solstice night; it was technically the longest period of darkness of the year, even if not by a very significant margin from many other winter nights. Its true significance, though, was related to considerations having little to do with statistics of the calendar.

I went over to the place where the others were forming into a tighter crowd, and in which there was a sense of expectancy in the subtle gestures and expressions of its individual members. Glances were now exchanged, the hand of one lightly touched the shoulder of another, and a pair of circled eyes gazed over to where two figures were setting their lanterns on the ground about six feet apart. The illumination of these lanterns revealed an opening in the earth. Eventually the awareness of everyone was focused on this roundish pit, and, as if by prearranged signal, we all began huddling around it. The only sounds were those of the wind and our own movements as we crushed frozen leaves and sticks underfoot.

Finally, when we had all surrounded this gaping hole, the first one jumped in, leaving our sight for a moment, but then reappearing to take hold of a lantern that another one handed him from above. The miniature abyss filled with light, and I could see it was no more than six feet deep. Near the base of its inner wall, the mouth of a tunnel was carved out. The figure holding the lantern stooped a little and disappeared into the passage.

One by one, then, the members of the crowd leaped into the darkness of this pit, and every fifth one took a lantern. I kept to the back of the group, for whatever subterranean activities were going to take place, I was sure I wanted to be on their periphery. When only about ten of us remained on the ground above, I maneuvered to let four of them precede me so that as the fifth I might receive a lantern. This was exactly how it worked out, for after I had leaped to the bottom of the hole, a light was

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ritually handed down to me. Turning about-face, I quickly entered the passageway. At that point I shook so with cold that I was neither curious nor afraid, but only grateful for the shelter.

I entered a long, gently sloping tunnel, just high enough for me to stand upright. It was considerably warmer down there than outside in the cold darkness of the woods. After a few moments, I had sufficiently thawed out so that my concerns shifted from those of physical comfort to a sudden and justified preoccupation with my survival. As I walked, I held my lantern close to the sides of the tunnel. They were relatively smooth and even, as if the passage had not been made by manual digging, but had been burrowed by something that had left behind a clue to its dimensions by the tunnel's size and shape. I had to admit that this delirious idea came to me when I recalled the message that had been left on my bedroom mirror: "What buries itself before it is dead?"

The uncanny spelunkers behind me began to overtake me, and I had to hurry along to keep up with those in front. The lanterns ahead bobbed with every step of their bearers, the lumbering procession seeming less and less real the farther we marched into that snug little tunnel. At some point I noticed the line ahead of me growing shorter. The processioners were emptying out into a cavernous chamber, where I, too, soon arrived. This area was about twenty feet in height, its other dimensions approximating those of a large ballroom. Gazing into the distance above made me uncomfortably aware of how far we had descended into the earth. Unlike the smooth sides of the tunnel, the walls of this cavern looked jagged and irregular, as though they had been gnawed at. The earth had been removed, I assumed, either through the tunnel from which we had emerged, or else by way of one of the many black openings that I saw around the edges of the chamber, for possibly they, too, led back to the surface.

But the structure of this chamber occupied my mind a great deal less than did its occupants. There to meet us on the floor of the great cavern was what must have been the entire slum population of Mirocaw, and more, all with the same eerily wide-eyed and oval-mouthed faces. They formed a circle around an altarlike object that had some kind of dark, leathery covering draped over it. Upon this altar another covering of the same material concealed a lumpy form beneath.

And behind this form, looking down upon the altar, was the only figure whose face was not greased with makeup.

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He wore a long, snowy robe that was the same color as the wispy hair rimming his head. His arms were calmly at his sides. He made no movement. The man I had thought would penetrate great secrets stood before us with the same professional bearing that had impressed me so many years ago, yet now I felt nothing but dread at the thought of what revelations lay pocketed within the abysmal folds of his magisterial attire. Had I really come to challenge such a formidable figure? The name by which I knew him seemed itself insufficient to designate one of his stature. Rather, I should name him by his other incarnations: god of all wisdom, scribe of all sacred books, father of all magicians, thrice great and more — rather, I should call him *Thoth*.

He raised his cupped hands to his congregation, and the ceremony was under way.

It was all very simple. The entire assembly, which had remained speechless until this moment, broke out in the most horrendous, high-pitched singing that can be imagined. It was a choir of sorrow, of shrieking delirium, and of shame. The cavern rang shrilly with the dissonant, whining chorus. My voice, too, was added to the congregation's, trying to blend with their maimed music. But my singing could not imitate theirs, having a huskiness unlike their cacophonous, keening wail. To keep from exposing myself as an intruder, I continued to mouth their words without sound. These words were a revelation of the moody malignancy that until then I had no more than sensed whenever in the presence of these figures. They were singing to the "unborn in paradise," to the "pure, unlived lives." They sang a dirge for existence, for all its vital forms and seasons. Their ideals were those of darkness, chaos, and a melancholy half-existence consecrated to all the many shapes of death. A sea of thin, bloodless faces trembled and screamed with pervertèd hopes. And the robed, guiding figure at the heart of all this — elevated over the course of twenty years to the status of high priest — was the man from whom I had taken so many of my own life's principles. It would be useless to describe what I felt at that moment, and a waste of the time I need to describe the event that followed.

The singing abruptly stopped, and the towering, white-haired figure began to speak. He was welcoming those of the new generation — twenty winters had passed since the "Pure Ones" had expanded their ranks. The word "pure" in this setting was a violence to what sense and composure I

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still retained, for nothing could have been more foul than what was to come. Thoss — and I employ this defunct indentity only as a convenience — ceased his sermon and moved back toward the dark-skinned altar. There, with all the flourish of his former life, he drew back the topmost covering. Beneath it was a limp-limbed effigy, a collapsed puppet sprawled upon the slab. I was standing toward the rear of the congregation, and attempted to keep as close to the exit passage as I could. Thus, I did not see everything as clearly as I might have.

Thoss looked down over the crooked, doll-like form, and then out at the gathering. I even imagined that he made knowing eye contact with me. He spread his arms, and a stream of continuous and unintelligible words flowed from his moaning mouth. The congregation began to stir, not greatly but perceptibly. Until that moment there was a limit to what I believed was the evil of these people. They were, after all, only that. They were merely morbid, self-tortured souls with strange beliefs. If there was anything I had learned in all my years as an anthropologist, it was that the world is infinitely rich in strange ideas, even to the point where the concept of strangeness itself had little meaning for me. But with the scene I then witnessed, my experience bounded into a realm from which it will never return.

For now was the transformation scene, the culmination of every harlequinade.

It began slowly. There was some slight movement among the crowd on the far side of the chamber from where I stood. Someone had fallen to the floor, and the others in the area backed away. The voice at the altar continued its chanting. I tried to gain a better view, but there were too many of them around me. Through the mass of obstructing bodies, I caught only glimpses of what was taking place. It had begun before I realized what was happening. . . .

The one who had swooned to the floor of the chamber seemed to be losing all former shape and proportions. I thought it was a clown's trick. They were clowns, were they not? I myself could make four white balls transform into four black balls as I juggled them. And this was not my most astonishing feat of clownish magic. And is there not always a sleight of hand inherent in all ceremonies, often dependent on the transported delusions of the celebrants? This was a good show, I thought, and giggled to myself. The transformation scene of Harlequin throwing off his fool's

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facade. O God, Harlequin, do not move like that! Harlequin, where are your arms? And your legs have melted together and have begun squirming upon the floor. What horrible, mouthing umbilicus is that where your face should be? *What is it that buries itself before it is dead!* The almighty serpent of wisdom — the Conqueror Worm.

It now started happening all around the chamber. Individual members of the congregation would gaze emptily — caught for a moment in a frozen trance — and then collapse to the floor to begin the sickening metamorphosis. This happened with ever-increasing frequency the louder and more franticly Thoss chanted his insane prayer or curse. Then there began a writhing movement toward the altar, and Thoss welcomed the things as they curled their way to the altartop. I knew now what lax figure lay upon it.

This was Kora and Persephone, the daughter of Ceres and the Winter Queen: the child abducted into the underworld of death. Except, this child had no supernatural mother to save her, no living mother at all. For the sacrifice I witnessed was an echo of one that had occurred twenty years before, the carnival feast of the preceding generation — *O carne vale!* Now both mother and daughter had become victims of this subterranean Sabbath. I finally realized this truth when the figure stirred upon the altar, lifted its head of icy beauty, and screamed at the sight of mute mouths closing around her.

I ran from the chamber into the tunnel. (There was nothing else that could be done, I have obsessively told myself.) Some of the others who had not yet changed began to pursue me. They would have caught up to me, I have no doubt, for I fell only a few yards into the passage. And for a moment I imagined that I, too, was about to undergo a transformation, but I had not been prepared as the others had been. When I heard the approaching footsteps of my pursuers, I was sure there was an even worse fate facing me upon the altar. But the footsteps ceased and retreated. They had received an order in the voice of their high priest. I, too, heard the order, though I wish I had not. And until that moment I had imagined that Thoss did not remember who I was. It was that voice that taught me otherwise.

For the moment I was free to leave. I struggled to my feet and, having broken my lantern in the fall, retraced my way back through cloacal blackness.

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Everything seemed to happen very quickly once I emerged from the tunnel and climbed up from the pit. I wiped the reeking greasepaint from my face as I ran through the woods and back to the road. A passing car stopped, though I gave it no other choice except to run me down.

"Thank you for stopping."

"What the hell are you doing out here?" the driver asked.

I caught my breath. "It was a joke. The festival. Friends thought it would be funny. . . . Please drive on."

My ride let me off about a mile out of town, and from there I could find my way. It was the same way I had come into Mirocaw on my first visit the summer before. I stood for a while at the summit of that high hill just outside the city limits, looking down upon the busy little hamlet. The intensity of the festival had not abated, and would not until morning. I walked down toward the welcoming glow of green, slipped through the festivities unnoticed, and returned to the hotel.

VII

WHEN I awoke the next morning, I saw from my window that the town and surrounding countryside had been visited during the night by a snowstorm, one that was entirely unpredicted. The snow was still falling and blowing and gathering on the now-deserted streets of Mirocaw. The festival was over. Everyone had gone home.

And this was exactly my own intention. Any action on my part concerning what I had seen the night before would have to wait until I was away from the town. I am still not sure it will do any good to speak up like this. Any accusations I could make against the slum populace of Mirocaw would be resisted, as well they should be, as unbelievable. Perhaps in a very short while, none of this will be my concern.

With packed suitcases in both hands, I walked up to the front desk to check out. The man behind the desk was not Beadle, and he had to fumble around to find my bill.

"Here we are. Everything all right?"

"Fine," I answered. "Is Mr. Beadle around?"

"No, I'm afraid he's not back yet. Been out all night looking for his daughter. She's a very popular girl, being the Winter Queen and all that

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nonsense. Probably find she was at a party somewhere."

A little noise came out of my throat.

I threw my suitcases in the backseat of my car and got behind the wheel. On that morning, nothing I could recall seemed real to me. The snow was falling, and I watched it through my windshield, slow and silent and entrancing. I started up my car, routinely glancing in my rearview mirror. What I saw there is now vividly framed in my mind, as it was framed in the back window of my car when I turned to verify its reality.

In the middle of the street behind me, standing ankle-deep in snow, were Thoss and another figure. When I looked closely at the other, I recognized him as one of the boys whom I surprised in that diner. But he had now taken on a corrupt and listless resemblance to his new family. Both he and Thoss stared at me, making no attempt to forestall my departure.

I had to carry the image of those two dark figures in my mind as I drove back home. But only now has the full weight of my experience descended upon me. So far I have claimed illness in order to avoid my teaching schedule. To face the normal flow of life as I had formerly known it would be impossible. I am now very much under the influence of a season and a climate far colder and more barren than all the winters in human memory. And retracing all the phases of past events does not seem to have helped; I can feel myself sinking deeper into a velvety white abyss.

At certain times I could almost dissolve entirely into this inner realm of awful purity and emptiness. I remember those invisible moments when in disguise I drifted through the streets of Mirocaw, untouched by the drunken, noisy forms around me: untouchable. But instantly I recoil at this grotesque nostalgia, for I realize what is happening, and what I do not want to be true, though Thoss prophesied it was. I recall his command to those others as I lay helplessly prone in the tunnel. They could have apprehended me, but Thoss, my old master, called them back. His voice echoed throughout that cavern, and it now reverberates within my own psychic chambers of memory.

"He is one of us," it said. "He has *always* been one of us."

It is this voice that now fills my dreams and days and my long winter nights. I have seen you, Dr. Thoss, through the snow outside my window. Soon I will celebrate that last feast that will kill your words, only to prove how well I have learned their truth.

To the memory of H. P. Lovecraft

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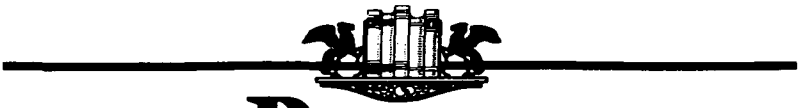

BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Modern Fantasy, David Pringle, (The Hundred Best Novels) Peter Bedrick Books, $8.95
. . . and some thoughts occasioned thereby.

THERE IS a rule that says you will call either fantasy or science fiction whatever you please to suit your purpose of the moment. Or at least so it seems, sometimes, in certain corners. For instance, to call Richard Matheson's *The Shrinking Man* fantasy because it suits your purpose, or John D. MacDonald's *The Girl, The Gold Watch, and Everything*, or Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*, or M. John Harrison's *A Storm of Wings*.

I would call them science fiction. Which means, by my lights, that four percent of Pringle's "Hundred Best Novels" are not properly included in this book. Knock out another percent for Robert A. Heinlein's "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag," which is not a novel by any stretch of the imagination. And so on. By my lights, about ten percent of this book doesn't belong here.

Do you care? Put it another way: Do you care that David Pringle has gone to this trouble at all, considering that "100 Best" books of any kind strike me as unnecessary? What purpose do they serve?

And yet. . . .

There are actually at least two questions before the house. Is this a necessary book after all, and, is this a good book of its kind? And, beyond that, there is the third and thorniest question: What is the difference between science fiction and fantasy? Because that is what it boils down to. The booksellers pile it all on the same shelf, the authors seem to drift from one to another *ad libitum* for the very large part, the magazines of the trade — *Locus*, the most prominent example — treat them all the same almost all the time. Is there a fundamental difference after all under all the surface similarity?

Let us dispose of a few sidetracks. 1) Science fiction began with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's

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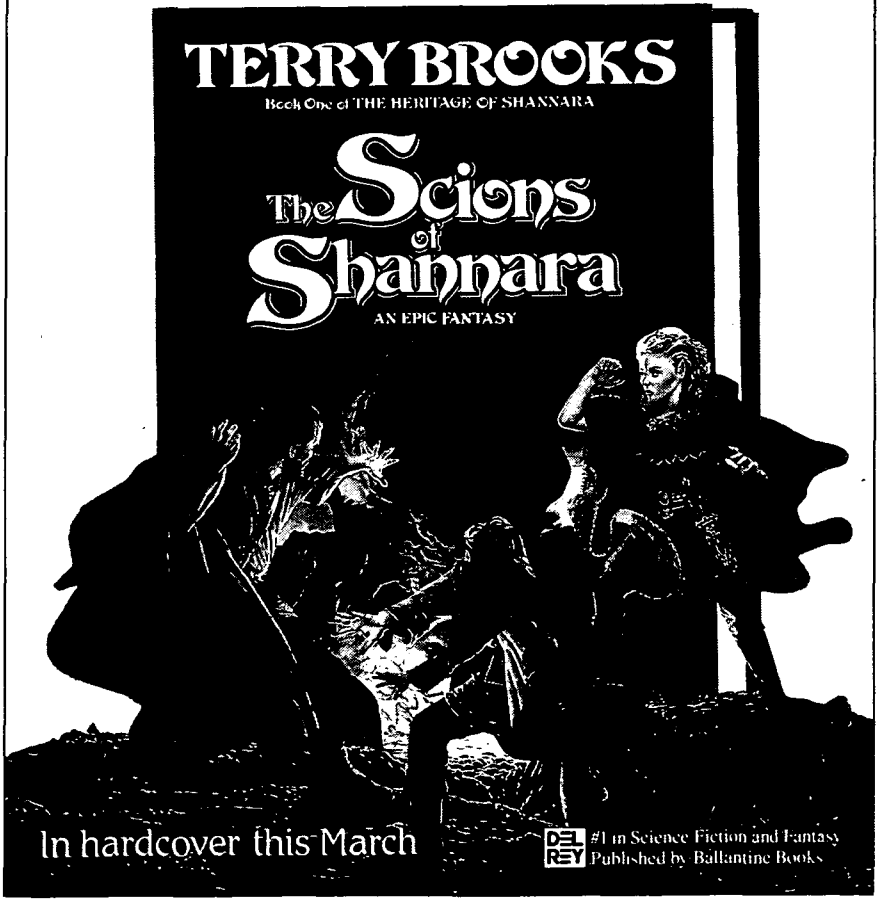
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Frankenstein, in 1818, and no earlier. 2) The roots of fantasy go back into the unrecorded past. 3) It is probably correct (as Pringle says) that the novel — that is, the novel as we know it, with a cast of characters who were interesting in part because they partook of no intervention by either spacemen or demons — is a recent if somewhat older invention than science fiction. (I could point to Shakespeare, among many others, to have been a novelist in all but form, on occasion, but that would be a quibble — nay, a quiblet — based simply on the fact that the novelist had to wait for enough people to learn to read.)

Those are my three givens. I don't think we can really come up with a science fiction novel any earlier than Shelley's, I don't think there's any question but that fantasy was the first literature, and I don't think that the novel can really be defined except in terms that take the turn of the nineteenth century into account.

The novel may be a transitory phenomenon as far as western literature goes. We may already be seeing its sharp decline, after barely two hundred years of existence. Certainly it's been a while, now — since the death of Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck and Fitzgerald, approximately — since the elegantly crafted work of that genre has also had something of importance to say. James Jones was a giant, but an awkward, clumsy one who got it out despite his stylistic failings. And he's dead, too. There are a lot — a lot — of good novelists around, but none of them seem to rise above the pack in the manner of those named above.

James Jones may have said it best — by speaking a semi-private language. He may have foreseen, earlier than anyone, that the novel in two hundred years had exhausted its major themes, and was ripe for the sort of second-growth that at the hands of a genius like Joyce can look like a new direction, but is in fact, in the main, a turning in upon itself because it has nowhere essentially new to go.

Perhaps not. But say for the sake of argument it is. Is science fiction going to fare any better... assuming it's not just a special case of fantasy, that is?

Well, let's dispose of that one. There is a sharp distinction between Hero's Aeolipile, the Roman engineering works, and space travel, nanotechnology, lasers, and nuclear fusion. The face of the world has been transformed as never before, and it shows no sign of stopping. If anything, when you consider that the next hundred years are going to see the human race literally transformed, we are only at the first baby

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steps of where we are going to be by 2090. This is a qualitative difference in the human condition that has never before been seen on this Earth.

I grant you the fact that the majority of people on this Earth in 2090 are going to be living just as they did in 1990, just as they did in 1890 and 1790. But they will not count for as much as they do today; they will have been left behind, as never before, by the new humanity — whatever that is, and however relatively few its numbers.

So, yes, science fiction is a distinct literature, no matter what you say, because it speaks to these things as no other form can. It speaks to them, it nurtures them, and this will continue to be true for any indefinite time into the future. It cannot help it. The transitory effects will all be there — the periods of depression with it all, balanced by the periods of wild optimism, and all the stages in between — but science fiction will endure them all and persist, because of the cultural demand for it.*

*Of course, you realize that the novel, per se, will read like science fiction. To us, that is. Now all we need is a time machine to go get them, waiting a hundred years in the future. We can't live up to them, because, of course, by the time we get there by normal means, they won't be science fiction. All without changing a word.

This cultural demand began to be placed on artists in 1818, when the Industrial Revolution began. There were fits and starts. For instance, Jules Verne, who created an effect that persists to this day in the instance of Martin Caidin and his ilk. But that is at the heart of our question. If science fiction is distinct from fantasy — all kinds of science fiction, and all kinds of fantasy — why do the writers not pay more attention, and stay within their own bounds? (Assume for a moment that there *are* bounds.)

Well, first of all, I'm not sure that's a germane question. Writers are an odd lot; it's not possible to say that a writer is a science fiction writer, as distinct from a fantasy writer, except for a very few who may just not have noticed that there is more than one way to skin a cat. More important, just because we at the moment don't know of many Japanese science fiction writers (or fantasy writers) is no sign that forty years from now, it won't be plain for all to see that what is being done in Japan, or China, or Hungary *right now* has turned out to be more to the point of fantasy, or science fiction, than anything that is being done in the usual places.

By usual, of course, I mean the States and England. Oh, and France. Well . . . the French. Ah, the French. They are at their best when they

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pay as little attention to the English and the U.S. as possible. Of course, the French *public* thinks Philip K. Dick is the epitome of science fiction writing. With A. E. van Vogt a fading but distinct second. So much for the native French, who can barely scrape a living.

But that is a point. The French have been flailing away at the science fiction scene since Verne, and have done some astonishing work, but hardly anyone outside of France has even heard of more than the merest tip of it. Ditto the Brazilians, except in spades. The Germans are hardly in better shape, with the staggering exception of the boys who worked on Perry Rhodan. Oh, yes, Wolfgang Jeschke, but that is the exception that proves the rule. Poland has one science fiction writer, Stanislaw Lem — the fact that there are dozens more has somehow escaped the world. If you want to cry, consider that there are at least half a dozen working in Lithuania, that I know of; which means that there are eight in Latvia, and about four in Estonia; Chechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Yugoslavia, and, for all I know, Albania; and then there's the Soviet Union.

Now the interesting thing about *that* is that every one of these is a science fiction writer. For all I know, the woods are full of fantasy writers in those parts — but we haven't heard of them. What I mean to say is, it's only in England and the U.S., apparently, that fantasy is much of a factor at all.

Of course, that's saying quite a great deal. It's saying that the non-western writer (I'll include France and Germany in that, as well as Spain and Italy, and Montenegro) finds his greatest satisfaction, or at least his best market, in science fiction rather than fantasy. It's also saying that, despite all this, the preponderance of the nonce is toward fantasy, simply because the U.S. and U.K. markets are comparatively huge. Why is that?

I think Pringle has the right of it. There is at the moment a depression of spirit in these two centers of speculative fiction, and the result is that a fair number of writers would rather do fantasy. The depression has to do with a disillusion with the thought that these two cultures are any longer at the technological cutting edge.

Oddly enough, this has fueled John Shirley, for just one, to write *more* and some of the most innovative science fiction. But that's another topic. So is the fact that Pringle, for another, has deliberately omitted trilogies, and such, from his "100 Best." The fact is that, *by and large*, (and only by and large), of the titles that come out day after day, never mind the quality, fantasy

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is by some slight margin, and of some slight time, dominant over science fiction, in the West — or as much of it as writes in English. (Oh, dear — I've forgotten Australia and New Zealand and Canada; well, the trouble there is that, again for some reason, they don't share in the trend.)

The concern *isn't* really why are the U.S. and U.K. writers turning to fantasy, because that will either tail off or it won't, and if it doesn't, it won't be because one is essentially more of something or less of something, but because of the cultural response. And the cultural response isn't something you dictate; it's the mind's reply to cultural pressure. It's damned interesting, but it only acts in support of the main concern.

The main concern is with the original question: What is the essential difference between science fiction and fantasy? And there I can speak without fear or favor: Fantasy is essentially conservative, while science fiction is essentially liberal.

Oh, you doubt me? Look at this:

Fantasy depends for its effect on the propitiation or compulsion of a higher power. Always, there has to be a higher power. That means that Alf of Swineherd, or whoever, has to find the magic ring, or whatever; or that Alf of Swineherd has to be the Prince in disguise — perhaps in disguise from himself, but that's a special case. The bottom line is that higher powers rule Alf, or that Alf *is* a higher power and it's just a matter of time before he discovers it.

No amount of jiggery-pokery will suffice to hide this fact. Some writers, of whom we have more than you would credit at first glance, are capable of hiding this fact almost indefinitely, but it will out in the end.

Science fiction, on the other hand, presupposes that only human intervention works. Even if Alf the Swineherd finds a ring, or even if Alf is really the Prince in disguise, etc., it will do Alf no good if Alf is not smart above his fellows. Science fiction has writers, of whom we have more than you would credit at first glance, who are capable of hiding this fact almost to the end. But it will out — Alf will pull it off. And he will do so only as the result of forces that he has set in train, or that are, at worst, neutral in precisely the way the Universe is neutral . . . it will kill us at the slightest transgression, but it will do so only because that's the way it works, not because it has taken a personal animosity that not all creatures share.

Now, operationally, this is a distinction so slight that many writers do not even realize it, and happily

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cross to one side or the other of speculative literature until hell won't have it. But as far as the reader is concerned, it's a difference that is profound. And at the present time, somewhat more of western readers prefer the essential conservatism to the essential liberalism in their reading.

I have no idea, really, why this is so. Perhaps they prefer to identify with heroes and heroines that *are* chosen, by some whim of Fate or some other demon. Perhaps it's more complicated than that. But whatever the reason, there's no doubt that it *is*.

Now, let me hasten to add, this is neither good nor bad. It just is. It has happened there was a time when fantasy was perfectly acceptable to the writers but was not so to the readers — *Unknown's* time, as Pringle says — and now there is a time, specific to the U.K. and even more so to the U.S., when things are the other way. What this tells us is, only, that things will change again, before they change back at a later time again, and so forth.

There is no right or wrong about it. But it is interesting that, in a sense, this swinging back and forth proceeds without respect to the writers. Oh, obviously, if the market is there, the books will be there. But it is noteworthy A) that a fair portion of the fantasy — the portion that Pringle didn't touch, for the most part — is by people who have not written much if any science fiction, and may very well go somewhere utterly different if the market for fantasy dries up, relatively speaking. While B) the portion that Pringle *did* touch on, heavily, is by people with unquestioned staying power.

What this may mean — and here I am going on a pure hunch —is that a core of writers exists who will write either science fiction *or* fantasy, depending on whim, and that around the core is another layer of writers who are more evanescent; who will vanish as the snow when fantasy dies down, to be replaced by writers of a kind of science fiction when that booms again. Meanwhile, the ones with staying power will simply stay.

I for one draw a sharp distinction between most writers and the endless spewers of endless sagas. I have not made a point of this. On the other hand, you may have noticed how little overt attention I pay to Book 12 of the Plem Saga. It is not, believe me, for lack of dipping into these things from time to time. Nor, oddly enough, for lack of good writing, because it does exist in these things. It is simply because while the writing may be good, there is just so much you can do with refiguring Celtic legends, and

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no outstanding example arises out of the mob of practitioners. Nor would reviewing an occasional example do the slightest good — there isn't any reason for the authors or the audience to pay the slightest attention to me in regard. The writers and the audience simply have the contract to deliver and consume as much of the stuff as the market will bear.

With which, we draw toward a close. What remains to be seen is whether this is a necessary book after all, and whether this particular example of it is good.

Yes, to my astonishment, it is a necessary book. For one thing, it smoked me out; caused me to say certain things I would not have articulated otherwise. More important, it puts into focus the whole question of what is fantasy, and, whether you agree with me on any particular or not, it will cause you to at least ponder that question.

Is it a good book of its kind? (Pringle even mentions a rival book, which is more oriented toward horror by his account.) Yes, I would say so. I would say so because whether *all* of the titles are fantasy or not is irrelevant. By my lights, not all of them are, and I think I am right, but, Jesus Christ, what difference do four or five titles make? The important thing is that this book be an honest effort, that it reflects what Pringle thinks, and that Pringle be an undoubted expert in his field. It certainly meets those criteria.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Nemesis, Isaac Asimov (Doubleday/Foundation, cloth, 364pp, $18.95)

I WISH ASIMOV'S gift for clarity could be distilled into a serum and injected directly into the blood of all who purport to be storytellers in the English language today. For style alone — a style seemingly plain, yet clear as glass — *Nemesis* is a pleasure to read. Anyone who wishes to have a short course in writing could do far worse than to analyze the way that Asimov presents ideas to his audience in such a way that each idea has been perfectly prepared for; so that even as it surprises us, we already understand the

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context so well that we grasp the new information instantly.

This style, which works so well in Asimov's non-fiction, is at its best when he uses it to tell stories. Like most science fiction, the story of *Nemesis* takes place on two levels. First, there is the cosmic story: A dwarf star is approaching our solar system from the south, where it has long been hidden behind a cloud of dust. The leaders of Rotor, an artificial habitat whose people regard themselves as far superior to the Earth-bound masses, decide to use their new hyper-assisted drive to make the two-year voyage at near light-speed. In order to avoid being followed, they tell no one of this new star, Nemesis, or of the danger it poses to all life on Earth.

Second, there is the personal story: Marlene, the daughter of the astronomer who discovered Nemesis, has grown up on Rotor within sight of Nemesis. She has the peculiar ability to discern, from subtle clues in outward behavior, what people are really thinking or intending; they think she is reading minds, but in fact she is reading behavior. This naturally isolates her from most other people, but that's fine with her. All she really wants is to get to the surface of an Earthlike moon that orbits Nemesis's large satellite.

In second-rate science fiction, the cosmic and personal stories are irrelevant to each other — we get "characters" solely to be witnesses of the cool stuff that happens on a cosmic level, or we get "ideas" thrown in only to make standard adventure or character stories seem like science fiction. In the best sf — like *Nemesis* — the two stories absolutely depend on each other. Resolution of the problems posed by Nemesis depends on Marlene and her family; resolution of Marlene's needs, and the needs of her parents, absolutely depend on the ideas and discoveries in the cosmic story.

Nemesis can be read without reference to any of Asimov's other works — though it doesn't take much mental exercise to connect this story with the later Robots and Foundation series, and see how it explains or foreshadows key events in the other books.

Asimov is only getting better as he gets older — a heartening thing for us younger writers to realize, as we move into middle age, for it means we aren't all doomed to follow the downward spiral that so many other grand old coots of the field have marked out for us. *Nemesis* may be his best novel ever, which means it is almost certainly one of the finest novels in science fiction. If it isn't on the Hugo or Nebula ballot, it will be because the fans and writers who vote on these things have forgotten that a writer doesn't

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have to be new to be brilliant. Remember that J.S. Bach was considered a bit old-fashioned in his time, too.

Cyberbooks, Ben Bova (TOR, cloth, 283pp, $17.95)

Carl Lewis has invented the ideal way to read a book: an inexpensive hand-held computer with a first-rate electronic display. It's no larger than a paperback book and no heavier, and once you own one, you can download book after book or buy tiny books-on-disks for a fraction of the cost of the old books-on-paper.

The trouble is, the publishing industry can't decide whether to embrace or destroy his invention. The whole distribution network realizes that this is a threat to their normal way of doing things; in vain does Lewis assure them that for every jobber, wholesaler, and salesman who loses his job, there'll be a new job opened up by the cyberbooks technology.

On the other hand, there are plenty of conniving bastards and bitches in the book biz who see that an idea like this can't be suppressed for long — and they want to be collecting the cyberbook profits when they start rolling in. There's even an occasional altruist, like the editor who falls in love with Lewis — even as she hopes to use the clout she'll get from having discovered him to publish a manuscript that she believes may be the greatest novel ever written.

The author of that manuscript, in the meantime, has been so badly hurt by the publisher's long silence that he loses his home, his job, and, finally, as depression gives way to derangement, his mind. The novel ends with a showdown in a room full of would-be killers, wrapping up as complex a screwball comedy plot as we've seen in science fiction. Because the novel is funny, it probably won't show up on the award ballots — but it deserves to show up on your shelves, because you won't read a funnier, more intelligent, more biting, and more pertinent satire for many years to come. And if you're a writer or would-be writer, you ought to read *Cyberbooks* for educational purposes: It represents a picture of the present-day publishing industry that is only slightly exaggerated. It really is as insane and self-defeating a business as Bova depicts.

Because the author is Bova, you can count on the ideas in *Cyberbooks* being worth examining. Why aren't we publishing more of our books electronically, saving forests of trees and by-passing the idiocies of publishing and marketing that stifle so much of our best fiction? So far costs are still too high. But what a marvelous future that will be, when a bunch of writers can band together and publish

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their novels in encrypted form, collecting 90% instead of 10% of the fees, even as readers pay less than half the price they do today. As present, though, you have to pay for expensive connect time or long-distance charges to download a book. Still, I want it on record that my novel *Ender's Game* may have been the first novel published in electronic format prior to its print publication: It was online and downloadable on Delphi back in early 1984, almost as soon as I finished writing it, and nearly a year before it came out in print. Anyone know of an earlier one?

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The only thing we can safely say about this torrid Hollywood love story is that it will never adapt to film.

The Date

By Larry Tritten

AND SO, FINALLY, as she had known he one day would, he called. There was only a moment of surprise when she heard his voice, because she had more or less subliminally been preparing herself for this for a long time, maybe even a year or two. And her reaction to the sound of his voice was exactly as she had known it would be: her libido rang like a holiday bell! Between his saying her name and her answering, there was a timeless moment filled with the pleasant satisfaction of the confirmation of her intuition and the incipient thrill of realizing that an exciting and dangerous adventure was beginning — an irresistible one. Her life had been conventional enough, too conventional, for years, and she was not going to let this go; besides, a part of her sensed that, as the old lyric said, this could be the start of something big.

"Daisy?"

"Yes. . . ." She spoke tentatively, giving the word just a slight undertow of the impression that she didn't recognize his voice, and thinking even as

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she did so that the game had begun. Play your part well, babe, she told herself.

"This is—"

And before he could go further, she cut in smoothly and exuberantly with, "Oh *hi!!*" and there was a beat, and then he said, "You know who this is?"

She laughed girlishly, and exclaimed, "Of course I do. Are you *kidding!*"

Another pause, and he said, "I haven't seen you in a while. How you been?"

"The usual," she said. "Plugging away." And then thought to add, "All work and no play. . . ."

"I know the feeling," he said, and gave a sigh. "I've been working my ass off lately, late nights at the studio." Pause. "No play?" he asked.

"Not much," she laughed (picturing him, wondering where he was calling from). "Dawn to dusk lately. Truth is, I'm starting to feel like a machine. Cheer me up." The last was a bold foray; she wanted to be anything but coy.

"How about dinner?" he said.

"Dinner?" She let the word linger, like an echo.

"Yeah. Have you eaten?"

She didn't say anything for a few seconds, then said, "No," letting the word melt promisingly in the aftermath.

"Would you like to go out?"

"To dinner?" Just a millimeter of coyness. Then: "I've got a frozen seafood linguine dinner here staring me in the face. I . . . well, go *where!*"

"You name it. I can get reservations at Spago. Rebecca's. Mason's . . . the Hamburger Hamlet? You name it. I've been eating alone nights, and I'm starting to go wacky from the lonesomeness of it. . . ."

Lonesome rather than lonely. This was a terrific game, Daisy thought, and, smiling, she touched herself very lightly on the inside of one thigh as if in pure symbolic ordination. The touch instantly filled her mind with a sensual heat that was startling in its impact.

"Well, even the Hamburger Hamlet beats this frozen dinner," she said casually. "Yes, I'd like to go out!" God, her glands were clamoring; she could hardly believe it. She'd always known she would go through with it, but now she could actually feel excitement *burgeoning* in her.

"Mason's beats the Hamlet."

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"I'd *love* it."

"Well, I 'd love you to," he said emphatically. "Is an hour enough time to get ready?"

Jesus, the things she had to do to get herself ready! "An hour is perfect," she said. "I'll get ready. I'm looking forward to it! Hey, how have you *been?*"

"We'll talk," he said. "I'll pick you up. . . . See you!"

"O.K."

Talk, she thought. And that's just the start of what we'll do, sweetie.

O.K. All systems were go. She raced into the bathroom, undressed, and stepped into the shower, singing Robert Plant's "Simply Irresistible" vibrantly and loudly as she luxuriated under the enlivening spray, then emerged in a cloud of turbid steam. She caught a glimpse of herself in the foggy medicine cabinet mirror and winked seductively.

Into the bedroom. At the bureau mirror, she zeroed in on some lethal maquillage. She wanted bedroom eyes. She used two shades of mascara, radiant blue lining the upper lash, violet below, then, with a lush lavender lipstick, gave herself a 1940s vamp mouth. She chose her clothing and laid it out on the bed. Black half-cup brassiere. Sooty panties and filmy black garter belt with floral appliqué and little red ribbons embellishing the garters. Sheer black stockings. An electric-blue silk tank top with low, low cleavage. Matching shorts of sequins on silk. Gleaming blue satin pumps. She normally didn't dress so *completely,* but this was a very special occasion. When she had put everything on, she appraised herself in the mirror. She was a dazzling display of blue light and silk and nylon and satin promise. Looking at her image, she said, "Do you really want to go through with this? You do have a boyfriend, you know." She smiled. "Yeah, I really do," she said huskily.

He was right on time, and when she answered the door, he was so distracted by her appearance that the obligatory show-biz hug was almost clumsy.

"How do I look?" she asked, and he simply stood back grinning, and then she hugged him again, but this time she held him for a moment, letting all of the color and fragrance and warmth of her penetrate.

"You're beautiful," he said.

He had a Bentley in the driveway. She didn't really think much about cars. Anyway, she knew he was rich enough to afford whatever he wanted.

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A Lamborghini. Whatever. But then, so was her boyfriend.

During the drive from West Hollywood to Brentwood, he talked casually about work, the movie business — facile, ordinary conversation, but she didn't miss the sharp appreciative sidelong glances he gave her several times. It was all primal ritual now. She was ready. He was ready. After all these years of *friendship*. . . .

In the restaurant they got an isolated table and settled into the polished leather and woodsy ambiance of the place with chilled Gibsons, his suggestion. There was more small talk, but all very relaxed (they *both* knew), and very warm, and by the third Gibson, very, very warm. When they were ready to order, he suggested the grilled chicken, and then, as if having made a faux pas, changed it to the grilled salmon.

"I like to let the guy order for me," she said agreeably. When the waiter was gone, he said, "Daisy."

"What?"

"I just wanted to say the name," he said. "I love it. It's fabulous."

She actually burst out laughing. "Jesus Christ! You're kidding." She touched his arm, letting her fingers linger. "If you only knew how much I always hated it! You know, I actually almost changed it, *seriously*. Daisy! God, I always thought of the dog in 'Blondie'!"

"Funny," he said quietly. "I always thought of it as a bit of pure metaphoric music. *Daisy*. Daisy Miller. Daisy in *Gatsby*. Daisy Clover. . . . I think of a field of flowers by Monet." He smiled, just looking at her.

It's really happening, she thought with whelming pleasure. Oh, you faithless broad! She was feeling *really loose* now after three Gibsons.

And they had another one after dinner. And then they were leaving, but before he opened the door of the Bentley for her, he put his hands on her shoulders and turned her gently and gave her one of those long, melting kisses that can only be described as delicious because they're all taste, mainly the foretaste of the exquisite thrills they were both acknowledging were now imminent.

"I want you," he said.

"God, I want you," she breathed.

"Your place or mine, princess?"

"Let's just get to a bedroom," she said, and she kissed him again, taking all the initiative. After so long, so very long, this was superlative. And she was hotter than Palm Springs on the Fourth of July.

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They went to his place at the beach. The door to the bedroom loomed before her like one of those magical portals to another world in a fantasy film. The bed was not a water bed, which surprised her, because it suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't had sex on anything but a water bed for years. Well, *chacun à son goût.*

But the blue silk sheets were like rippling water, and he undressed her with a perfect blend of finesse and lust, kissing each shoe after he removed it, draping the stockings around his neck after he removed them.

"Incredible," he whispered.

"Get those pants off and make love to me," she blurted.

Which he did. Skillfully. Avidly. Passionately. Dynamically. Heroically. Lovingly.

Afterward he said, "Want a drink?"

"I want you," she said. "*More* of you."

The kiss was quintessentially romantic.

"That's no problem," he said. "I can't get enough of you. I've wanted this to happen for years."

She looked him in the eyes. "But we do have a problem, don't we? We're both, uh, *with* someone. And we are all friends."

"I don't care," he said.

"Neither do I. Kiss me again."

The kiss led to more . . . and more.

During a lull he said, "Your outfit goddamned near knocked me out. Normally I just see you in a blouse or top, but you really put on the ritz tonight."

"This is *better* than sex with your own kind," she said. "God, I can't get *enough*." She was thoughtful for a moment. "The only thing is . . . Don. Jesus, what will he think?"

He sighed. "Who cares?" he said. "Maybe this will give him some incentive to get off his tail and do something productive. . . ." He thought for a moment, then laughed. "Like invent a better mousetrap!" His four-fingered hand moved very gently through her soft eiderdown toward her cloaca . . . *again!*

"Oh God, Mickey, oh Christ," she breathed hotly, opening herself to him . . . *again.* It was the hottest night in the history of Hollywood, she thought, and goddamned well the most wonderfully memorable.

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Mary Turzillo teaches at Kent State University and has sold fiction and poetry to Weird Tales, Asimov's *and other magazines. She writes: "From listening to my father describe his inventions for construction of underwater structures, I became fascinated with the idea of human life adapting to ocean floor habitats, and this gave rise to the world of the Kraken."*

Kraken

By Mary A. Turzillo

THE WATER IN the classroom was so stale that Ariste almost fell asleep during Natural Science. The other kids squirmed and giggled, and Mademoiselle Camion, the pretty teacher, seemed bored by the lesson. On top of that, Ariste thought dully, everything she was teaching them was wrong.

"What created life?" Mademoiselle asked. The children chanted, "The hot brine created life."

Mademoiselle grimaced and brushed a school of mannakrill away from her face. "From where comes the hot brine?"

"From the magma under the world," droned the children.

"And from where comes humankind?"

It was so near the holiday, nobody had bothered to study. They faltered, each listening for somebody else's answer, until they broke into titters.

"Who knows the answer? Hauban? Ruisse? Filou?" Her smile faded; her gaze lit on Ariste. Ariste knew the approved answer, but held it back like a dragonfish holding prey that a dragoneer wants to pry from its jaws.

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Mademoiselle's pretty brow furrowed. "Ariste?"

"Humankind comes from the black smokers," he said dutifully. And then added, "Only, it doesn't."

Mademoiselle looked annoyed. "The others can't hear you, Ariste."

That was silly. He had clicked his defiant comment very clearly.

"Ariste!"

Fourteen pairs of young eyes turned toward him with malevolent interest. Ariste knew very well that he was not a popular child.

He fidgeted with the knot in his breechcloth. "My mother says humankind comes from above, where the thin water is."

"And what, may I ask, is thin water?"

Ariste drew in a great breath of water and prepared to answer. The other children were beginning to make little moans and clicks of mockery.

"Children!" Mademoiselle's eyes were the color of redworms.

"Please, Mademoiselle," drawled Filou, the mayor's son. He was a sharp-faced boy, skinnier than Ariste, but agile and strong in a fight. "Thin water is this stuff Ariste's brilliant mummy knows all about, only, she can't show to anybody." The others laughed, and Ariste felt his face go hot against the tepid water in the classroom.

Mademoiselle was not amused. Her face, thought Ariste, was quite ugly when she was cross.

"My mother's vacuums are never perfect. There is something in the chambers—"

The clickers to end the school day sounded, and the children shouted Ariste down as they swam for the door.

Ariste's lateral stripe tingled as he felt the hostile movements of the others. He gathered his things and avoided Mademoiselle's hard stare as he swam out.

Ruisse was waiting for him, her octopus draped affectionately about her body, its arms entangled in her drifting blonde hair. Ruisse was his friend, the only child who did not laugh at his mother and him. When the others made fun of him, she often turned on them with fury, defending him like an eel guarding its crevice. But now her face was solemn.

"Ariste, she's really angry now." She twiddled the end of her braid.

Ariste said nothing. Of course Mademoiselle was angry.

"I don't blame you. You have to believe what your mom tells you."

Ariste grabbed his luciferin lantern from the rack and began to stroke

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rapidly, not really wanting to talk to Ruisse. "It's probably true, as you well know."

Ruisse swam beside him. Her sleek body cut through the unheated water like hot brine through metal. "Maybe it is. Your mom talks to you all the time, explaining her experiments—"

"She has proof, Ruisse. She found a little metal thing from up there."

"How does she know this metal thing doesn't come from the magma?"

Ariste snorted, and the warm water purled around her face. "It's too perfect. It's a six-sided thing."

She considered, and answered more mildly, "How does she know someone here didn't make it, or it came from a factory in another town?"

"I don't know. It didn't look like it came from any factory here. I never saw anything like it before. It certainly wasn't ceramic; it was metal."

"Workers in Villenord work in metal."

Ariste stopped swimming and shrugged. "Jewelers. This didn't look like jewelry."

"Where did she find it?"

"In the silt, a kilometer north of the black smoker. The sediment's thinner there." He allowed himself to drift toward her. "How is Pieuvre?" Pieuvre was her octopus. He stroked the creature's silky head.

Pieuvre, who had been devenomed to make her a safe pet, had recently run into trouble with a dragonfish, lured apparently by the luminous patches inside the thing's mouth. Ariste had come upon Ruisse in an abandoned yard too far from the smoker, trying to pry the dragonfish's jaws open and free the pet octopus. By herself, she was too weak. Ariste had thrust his hand into the fish's maw and broken the jaw hinge. But he was severely stung by the dragonfish's internal symbiotes. Ruisse had towed him home by his hair, in shock.

"Fine," Ruisse said. "Look, her scars are fading."

"Mine, too."

Ruisse ran a finger over the welts on the back of his forearm. He pulled back, and she toyed with the tips of Pieuvre's tentacles. "I feel somebody clicking for you."

"Yeah. My mom, I guess." Ariste uttered an amplified click in the public mode. Everybody in Sud de Chaleur would know Ariste was called, and that Ariste had replied. He hated everybody knowing his business.

His mom said people would not be able to use sound vibrations in thin

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water because they would not travel as far. Therefore, sound communications must have evolved after the descent. But perhaps they would use some form of visual communication, because light waves would travel farther in the thin water.

Ruisse's soft face looked concerned in the gleam of Ariste's lantern. Abruptly, he held his palm out in farewell and darted away.

It was his dad, Eubert Gres, calling. Of course. His mother was still missing, the third school day.

He followed his father through the kitchen window. Eubert Gres swam slowly. It was just as well he worked at the oxygen factory; his lungs had been seared by mining by-products when he was young, and he could not breathe deeply enough to survive where the oxygen was thinner, away from the heart of Sud de Chaleur.

Eubert had not cooked the mannakrill enough, and it still gave off faint light in Ariste's bowl. That was all right. He hid a grin at the spectacle of his father's lips getting slowly smeared with luciferin. In the dim kitchen, his mouth glowed like a predatory fish's. Ariste smirked, then realized his own face must be aglow.

"Wipe your mouth," said the father, holding out a sponge. It was the first thing he had said since Ariste had come home. Then, without warning: "I think this time she's not coming back."

Ariste winced. He was a lonely child, and worshiped his mother. She was a genius, he thought. She could name every living thing in their world; she could explain everything that happened. He was her assistant and constant companion. He was the only person who understood her ideas, and he had sworn that when he grew up, he would vindicate her theories before the village.

Why was his father so cold about Calice's disappearance? Eubert Gres was bitter, and not just because of his breathing disability. When they had fired Calice, Eubert had nearly lost his job, too. The only thing that saved him was that one superintendent enjoyed listening to Calice's theories, though of course he considered her insane.

That superintendent considered Calice an amiable freak. The rest of the town was not as kind. The community was not so affluent that they appreciated a woman whose toil was devoted to investigating the origins of life, a woman who worked only on theories, never on productive work.

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Especially when her theories were so counter to logic and common sense.

Ariste Gres, always sticking up for his mother, suffered for her unpopularity. To make matter worse, he was a know-it-all at school. Mademoiselle and the children would have been quite content just to pity him, an ill-kempt, ill-fed child whose mother neglected him to chase gauzefish.

But he didn't want their pity. He preferred contempt.

And Eubert Gres, who had married young, loving his wife for her pursuit of truth, also suffered. The community mocked him as a fool. His work at the oxygen factory slacked off because he was obsessed about his wife's strange ways. Yes, he had once admired her vision. But she went too far.

Ariste floated in his hammock that night, listening for the comforting clicks of his mother's return. She had been gone — how long? Too long. He drifted in and out of sleep. The water-scent of stale mannakrill woke him — leftovers for breakfast again. His father was a poor homemaker.

Ariste ate the mannakrill quietly, not looking at Eubert. After, he gathered the cups from dinner and breakfast; clearly his father was too despondent to wash them. He scrubbed them with sand, letting the slow current from the oxygen factory rinse them.

It was nice living near the oxygen factory, thought Ariste as he swam to school. Otherwise, life stank.

They had the oral quiz again, but Ariste kept his mouth shut, even when Mademoiselle asked him three questions in a row, and Filou crossed his eyes at him. Ariste's mind was elsewhere. He was too worried about his mother to think about the origins of life. Almost certainly she had gone looking for the Kraken, and probably with inadequate oxygenating equipment.

At lunch, someone had put a little slate in his bag. On it was a rhyme:

Calice, Calice, on a quest
Off to find the Kraken's nest.
She's a crazy, and her son
Looks to be another one.

Breaking reusable slates was a serious violation of school rules. None-

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theless, Ariste rammed the slate into a crevice and pounded it until it shattered. Immediately he felt sorry. He might have recognized the handwriting.

Filou and Hauban were waiting for him, with another boy he did not recognize.

"You, pal. Meet Gruau," said Filou. "He's Hauban's cousin, from Nordville."

Ariste kicked past them, the stream cold on his face.

"Where's your manners, Ariste? Gruau, tell Ariste here what you heard in Nordville about his mom."

The strange boy, who had a puckered face like a redworm's, recited as if by rote, "Calice Grss fucks dragonfish and—"

He didn't get to finish the sentence. Ariste swung at his sucked-in cheek, then rammed a thumb into the corner of his mouth and ripped with all his strength. Gruau's lip tore bloodily, and he emitted high-pitched sounds that hurt Ariste's ears.

Ariste somersaulted and tried to flee, but Filou had hold of his breechcloth. It came loose in his hand, and Ariste's ankle tangled in it.

"You hurt my cousin!" Hauban screamed. He grabbed Ariste's kicking ankle and shoved a fist toward his crotch. Ariste flipped sideways, blocking the blow, and elbowed Hauban. Filou had retreated, laughing hysterically. Gruau simply bellowed.

Hauban was not as dirty a fighter as Filou, but Ariste felt obliged to grab his nose and shake him by it. Hauban darted sharp-nailed hands at Ariste's face, raked him near an eye. Ariste let go of Hauban's lip and tried to swim away. But the breechcloth was still tangled in his legs, and before he could kick free, Hauban jumped on him and pinned his arms.

Filou drifted over, affecting nonchalance. He lifted his arm high and brought it down on Ariste's nose. His nose would have been broken if he hadn't suddenly wrenched away by kicking Hauban savagely in the chest.

Then Mademoiselle swam into the schoolyard.

Ariste glimpsed the outrage growing in the teacher's face. He jackknifed away, scattering the lanterns the three boys had been carrying, and broke into a powerful butterfly stroke into the darkness.

He knew his way home in the dark.

His father had failed to feed the luciferin lanterns in the house, Ariste noticed. The house was all but invisible in the darkness. Suddenly embar-

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rassed at the loss of his breechcloth, he swam into an upper window and began rummaging in the dimness for another. When he looked up, his father was floating in the doorway.

"Is Mom—"

"No. She's not back."

"That oxygenator would last—"

"Even odds it's dead by now." Eubert looked haggard in the dim light. When he said *dead,* Ariste's skin rippled with horror. His mother had been exploring water far into the cold, away from the smoker and away from the oxygen factory. Travelers even between towns had to carry portable oxygenators.

Eubert regarded Ariste with eyes like those of a dead thing that had drifted to the bottom. "Ariste," he said in that cold click, not even in the intimate mode, "this is adult business. You are not to get involved." Then he turned away, and Ariste was alone.

Ariste wrapped another breechcloth around his hips and tied it wrestler style, a good, tight knot that would last even through another encounter with Filou. Then he swam straight out the window and down the plastic dome that was his mother's makeshift laboratory.

Inside, he squeezed a packet of food into the luciferin lamp, and the room slowly warmed with bacterial light. Calice's specimens were precisely arranged on shelves and in glass bottles; her equipment, laboriously handmade, was covered against the sediment that shifted down from the smoker. Ariste opened the cabinet where she kept her log, a permanent record punched with a scribing tool into plastic film. He unscrolled it and read the latest entry.

Her destination was far into the cold, into the dead water that had no free oxygen. She had taken two bottles of oxygenating bacteria and enough food to keep the bacteria going for about eighty hours.

But those eighty hours were nearly up, if the chronometer set in the floor was correct. Ariste brushed sediment off its face and made sure.

His father had forbidden him to go looking for her. Should he go to the town marshals, ask for help with a rescue mission? No! The thought of begging Filou's father was repulsive. Anyway, they would fool around and wait until it was too late.

What if something dreadful had happened to Calice? What if she had found another black smoker, perhaps a small one, and had been scalded,

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or tumbled in where she could not swim out?

Such a thing could be a menace to Ariste, too.

What if something, maybe the Kraken itself, had captured Calice?

But there was no Kraken. Everybody had assured Ariste of that.

Yet his mother had spoken of a thing she called a kraken. She had also explained her theories to him, and there had to be more; there had to be forms of life more adapted to the world. Only humanity was forced to struggle so just to stay alive.

At least the days of the magnesium sacrifice were over. At one time, adults and children alike labored to recover the magnesium nuggets downcurrent of the black smoker. Many died of the toxic waters, poison in their lungs. Others, like Eubert Gres, were crippled by the lung disease.

Ariste packed for his mission.

How far had Calice gone? Two bottles of bacteria; a dozen packets of food — Ariste feared she had swum far. He should have at least that much oxygenating bacteria, and enough to bring both of them back.

Calice had taken most of it.

Her laboratory was meticulously laid out, but it operated on the edge of poverty.

Ariste squirted what bacteria and food were left into storage bottles and took two oxygenators. He cursed that he had only one for himself and one for Calice, but there was no spare. If one failed, they would have to pass it back and forth between them.

He held the mouthpiece of one to his lips and inhaled deeply. Richly oxygenated water filled his lungs, making him giddy. He tested the other, too. O.K.

Food? Would he be far enough out that a net would not gather mannakrill or small squid, stuff he could snack on without cooking? Was there time to go back to the house for a bar of pressed krill?

In the cold outer waters, he would need food for strength. Swimming in the utter cold ate at a person's very soul.

Let's call in an old debt, he decided.

An octopus darted away from the upper window of Ruisse's house. It had to be Pieuvre. Ariste recognized the scars. Ariste was always surprised that octopuses could move so fast. He felt that creatures with arms and legs — like humans — were awkward.

Ariste drifted over the sill of the bedroom window and heard soft,

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private clicks from below. The hesitant, soft voice was Ruisse's. The other was not Ruisse's mother, although its tenor at first suggested a woman.

No, it was a boy's voice. Grating, strident.

"Got a crush on the crazy's son?" it asked.

Ruisse's voice was too soft to hear.

"Well, steer clear of him, mergirl, if you want to stay out of hot water. Hauban and me, we're thinking of starting a lantern-rental business. You, we'll give a discount if you're a good kid."

"My mother feeds my lantern when I go to school. There's always enough to come home by, too."

Laughter. "You're kind of slow, aren't you?"

Ariste sensed an eddy of movement in the water, quick slipping of flesh against flesh.

"I don't do that yet," clicked Ruisse. "I'm too young."

"Never too young," hissed the other voice. More laughter, and a curl of cold water, as an iris door was opened, closed.

Ariste flushed with outrage. Even as he somersaulted in the water to swim to the lower floor, however, Ruisse stroked into the upper level.

Her face was tight in the light of her lantern. "You heard all that?"

"He won't get away with it."

Ruisse sighed. "I know. Mademoiselle won't let them run an extortion racket."

"I don't mean that. I mean I'm going to rip him open like a gulper trying to eat a house."

Ruisse smiled. "Ariste, all by yourself?"

"Hey, right makes might."

She laughed. "Don't worry. He couldn't do anything even if he had the guts." Then, serious: "Has your mother come back?"

Was his mother's disappearance public knowledge? Clicks, even in private mode, carried throughout the town.

"Let me help, Ariste. My parents can organize a search party—"

"No."

She paddled across the room and listened at the window. "Then what can I do?"

"I need food. Some for myself, a few bars of krillcake, maybe. But mostly food for the oxygen bacteria."

"You're going into the Dark Cold?"

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Children called it that. The Dark Cold. "Yes. Alone."

She turned to him. "Where would I get it?"

"Your parents work at the bacteria-breeding plant. Can you steal some?"

"Steal, Ariste?"

He looked at her, and she looked back. The light from her lamp was dying, the luciferin almost exhausted. He said nothing.

And she: "Come with me."

ARISTE FOLLOWED Ruisse through a window at the back of the bacteria-breeding plant into an untidy storage room. There she showed him nets holding half-empty bottles.

"Rejects. Leftovers," she clicked in the whisper mode.

Ariste stuffed five of the fullest bottles into his own net.

Ruisse floated in the dark water, motionless and almost invisible. "Let's not leave together. They'll feel our wake if there are two of us. One kid at a time, less chance of getting caught."

Ariste made his body and his net as narrow as he could. If someone did feel his movement through the water, they would mistake him for a fish snooping in the garbage.

He felt Ruisse's gaze following him into the Cold Dark. Was she concerned for his safety? Perhaps, he thought. But she was also curious. He grinned to himself. Had she almost asked to come with him?

His mother's second-best map crinkled in his hand as he read the way. Even without his lamp, he could feel the embossed features. And he was soon in total darkness, swimming fast away from town.

The towns all lay in a line, along a ridge near the string of black smokers. To swim far from that ridge was deadly, unless you were equipped for ocean voyaging. The story was that Picotin Vrai, one of Ariste's great-grandfathers (on his mother's side, of course), had swum clear round the earth.

A true story? He had asked Calice. Yes, she said, possibly the world was round. But maybe Picotin Vrai had merely swum in a big circle. The explorer had heard clicks in a strange accent and had crossed a ridge where there were many black smokers. But he had never found a town. Where had the clicks come from?

He brought no proof back, and he was considered a loony, just like his great-granddaughter.

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Ariste did not plan to circumnavigate the globe. His grandfather had used complex oxygenating equipment that Calice could not duplicate today.

Ariste swam for the place Calice called Kraken's Nest. She had been fascinated with something she saw there. Ariste was almost sure that was where she had gone.

It was a deep ravine, formed by seismic activity, with cliffs overhanging its bottom. A slow current had widened the deep, cold bottom like a cave. He and Calice had explored the place. Recently she had begun to call it Kraken's Nest. Following the map, he swam to the place where Calice claimed to have seen the kraken.

Kraken? What was a kraken? A gigantic squid? A fabulous creature big enough to eat the oxygen factory? That was what a kraken was in legend, but Calice said she had found a real kraken in this place. She had not been close enough to know exactly what it was. She was secretive about it. *Be fair, Mom. Haven't I been your faithful assistant? Take me to see it.* She had promised. Soon, she said.

Ariste swam on in darkness, inhaling occasionally from his oxygenator. He felt the deadness of the place. Was he swimming into a trap? There were fresh marks on the map, new places Calice had scribed with neat, sharp strokes. But Ariste mistrusted the map. He glided in darkness, cold water rippling against his sides.

And suddenly faint movement stirred against his lateral stripe, faint sounds against his ears. The water warmed slightly. "Mom?" His clicks sounded dead against the faint current.

"Ariste!" A scream, triumphant, but also anguished. He echolocated her, swam fast, trailing his net of bottles and tools.

"Ariste, here," she said. He sensed her writhing in the cold water. He fumbled in the net and put a pinch of food in the luciferin lamp. It glowed dimly, and he saw a huge ledge.

From under that, his mother's voice sounded. He swam underneath the ledge, and realized it was too regular to be a natural formation.

Under, attached to it, was a sphere, half-mired in the soft bottom. The silt was only about a meter deep; they were far from the spewing of the smoker, and a slow local current kept the place relatively clean.

His mother was at the bottom of a hole in the silt, buried up to her waist, wedged against the huge spherical thing. Her hair was wild, broken

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free from her swimming turban. She looked frightened and hurt.

"Ariste, is your father with you?"

"No, Mom. I didn't tell him. He would have forbidden me to come."

"I'm caught."

Caught? Ariste inhaled a bit of water and realized it carried the taste of blood. Calice was bleeding. *Be calm,* he told himself. *Only babies panic.*

"Something on this thing snagged me. I don't think it was meant to, but—"

Ariste steadied himself and focused on the huge sphere under which Calice was pinned. It was not completely smooth; mechanical-looking things jutted from its surface.

"What is this thing?" he asked. His whispered clicks resonated with fear, fear that he could not roll the thing off his mother.

Calice took a breath from the tube of her own oxygenator and wiped silt from the surface of the strange sphere. Ariste saw what she was doing, and continued to work until he could read the words, dim black on smooth, transparent stuff: USS KRAKEN.

"Oh, hey. This doesn't look human-made," he said slowly.

"I think it is. Otherwise, why are we able to read something written on it?"

"What in the world is it?" He ran a finger over the words on the smooth surface. How would he ever free her?

Calice answered in a steady voice. "It's been here a long while, from the look of it. I think it's some kind of vehicle. Something to travel in."

"Like a litter?"

"It may go faster than a vehicle propelled by human swimmers."

Maybe this was a key to rescuing her. "How does it move?"

"I'm not sure. I've had plenty of time to think about it, though." She laughed ironically.

"How did you get pinned?"

"I was experimenting with its propulsion system. It seems to be designed to go up and down rather than along the bottom, as a swimmer might do."

He squinted. "You think it was designed to go into the deep trench?"

"Maybe. But I think it came from above."

Ariste was silent. This thing would be proof that there was a form of

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life that lived high, high above them. His mind raced with wonder. But his mother was trapped! He had to free her, so she could go back and bring others to see this proof of a world above.

"You need oxygen?" he clicked in whisper mode, noticing that she sucked on her breathing tube a little too often.

"I still have some. These bacteria use food more efficiently than the ones they make at the factory. I grew them myself. But, yes, I'll need the oxygenators you brought. In order for us to get back."

"I still don't understand what happened."

She inhaled a bit from her oxygenator tube. "There's some kind of noxious liquid in these chambers here —" She indicated plasticlike blisters on the menacing shape above the sphere. "It seems to be lighter than water. I think the sphere was designed to release some of this liquid when they want to descend."

"Lighter than water? How can that be?"

She laughed, then inhaled deeply from her tube. "Ariste, you know there are liquids lighter than water. Oil, for example. Remember, it slowly floats up if you let it out of its bottle."

He was thunderstruck. Was this how she had planned to travel up, to explore the world above them?

She continued. "But this wasn't a nice liquid at all. It nearly choked me. I — I made the mistake of releasing some. It took a lot of fiddling to figure out how to do it. When I did — well, the sphere began to settle. And it rolled on my legs."

Ariste thought hard. "If they had a way of falling, then they must have had a way of rising, too."

Calice smiled wanly. "I'll make a heretic of you yet, bucko."

"You mean, scientist."

"Same thing, in Sud de Chaleur."

"There would be a liquid heavier than water — mercury, maybe — they would release to go up, right?"

"Good guess."

"Not mercury?"

"Not a liquid. Fragments of some heavy metal. My guess would be iron."

Ariste threw a handful of food into his lamp and began to swim around the sphere. He was so excited he nearly forgot to breath from his oxygenator tube.

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Halfway around, he was startled by Calice's voice. "Eyes of a dragonfish, Ariste! Stay where you are, and hold the lamp up against the sphere. No, to the left." She gasped. "My God!"

"What is it?"

"Ariste, can you see inside the sphere? No? Wait." He heard her rummage in her net. Then her lantern glowed.

He started to warn her not to waste luciferin food. And then her lantern illuminated the inside of the sphere.

People inside the sphere.

Odd, deformed people, two men and a woman, chests narrow, sick-looking, nostrils tiny, eyes curiously front-set. They seemed to lack lateral stripes entirely, although it was hard to tell under the constrictive clothing.

Calice and Ariste stared, silent, hard breathing. Finally Calice clicked, very soft, "I'm not crazy, am I? Are they really human?"

Calice, crazy? Could Calice, the smartest woman Ariste knew, think she was crazy? "I don't know. They must be. But are they just very asleep, or dead?"

"Dead."

"Yeah. I think."

"Ariste, go back! Go back, and get somebody, a witness. No!" she cut him off sharply. "I will survive. My leg has circulation in it. Even if—Look, suppose I lose my leg. What is that, if I prove that there are other beings up there?"

Ariste sucked dead water into his lungs. "Mom, please! Dad would kill me. He'd kill himself. It isn't safe here. We've found bones of dragonfish as large as—"

"Dragonfish aren't predatory. They'd be frightened of anything as big as us."

"Then what do they eat, to get that big?" He swam around the sphere toward her.

She was silent. He couldn't see her face, but he knew she acknowledged that he was right. "Ariste, do as I say. Leave some oxygen food here and go back for witnesses."

"No! They won't come with me! They hate me, and they think you're a crazy! I have to bring you back."

He shone his lantern all over the surface of the Kraken. Lead pellets,

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he thought. There was some way that the humans inside the transparent bubble could release metal pieces to let it ascend. If it ascended, it would free Calice's leg, and he could get her home. Together they could convince the townspeople.

A series of metal disks hugged the hull — steel, maybe, coated with lacquer or paint. But how were they attached?

"Mom?"

"Ariste, stay away from those."

So they were what he was looking for.

Metal prongs clasped them. Ariste jiggled one prong. Tight. In his packnet he found a knife and began to pry. No good; they would not budge.

"Ariste, you'll destroy the sphere. I said, stop!"

For the first time in his life, he knew he had to disobey her. He half-scrabbled, half-swam up the surface of the sphere. Near the top was an opaque panel.

The substance of the sphere looked like a ceramic common in buildings in the towns along the Great Concourse of black smokers, used for furnaces and machinery housings. Usually opaque, but sometimes transparent, it did not fracture easily, and could be machined.

What were these alien humans doing in a bubble of the stuff?

Was there instrumentation inside the transparent sphere, intended to drop the weights? If so, how could he get to the controls inside the sphere?

"Ariste, no!" His mother's voice thrilled with pain: not physical anguish, but fear that he would damage her wonderful discovery.

Ariste rummaged his net. Wire cutters. He honed them against the ceramic handle of his knife.

The weights and the prongs felt slimy, like things left out too long that have acquired a coating of tiny living things.

Gritting his teeth until his jaw hurt, he bore down on one of the prongs. It gave. A second yielded more easily. By the third, he had caught the knack of cutting them. One weight fell free and sank.

But nothing happened. He set to work on the next weight, and the next. A low, sucking feeling against his ribs told him the Kraken was rising. But not enough. He freed one more weight.

Calice screamed. "I'm free! Get clear!"

Suddenly he understood.

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The wake of the Kraken would suck him in, batter him senseless! He kicked free and swam away with big, round strokes.

The Kraken ascended. He could hear it climbing, even after it was out of sight in the darkness of the canyon.

Calice wailed. "Why did you cut so many weights free! It's getting away from us!" He searched the water with his eyes and ears, and found her, swimming up from below him. He tasted fresh gouts of blood from her injured leg. She did not move her legs, but stroked only with her arms.

He began to swim upward, in the Kraken's wake.

"No!" Calice screamed. "It's going up toward the cliffs. It's not going to clear the cliffs."

She caught up with him. "It may — listen, Ariste. What was in there, inside that bubble — was not water. It was the thin water, the stuff I hypothesized from the beginning."

Ariste was ahead of her. "They breathe this thin water?"

She clung to his arm. "Yes! But you know, when you go down into a canyon, maybe even into a deep trench, the pressure gets greater. And when you go up, the pressure is less."

Ariste closed his eyes and listened to the progress of the Kraken, scraping against the cliffs above them. "How far up?"

She clicked very softly. "Maybe as much as eleven kilometers up. Ariste, it would be as if they were in a vacuum."

And he understood, almost as soon as she had said it.

"Swim, son, swim for it." And she flipped toward the mouth of the canyon, going with the slight current, and her arms churned like the blades of a machine. Her left leg was useless, but she kicked awkwardly with the right. He held back with her, unable to speed her progress, but unwilling to leave her behind.

"Swim ahead!" she screamed.

He gathered himself to plunge forward. But then the Kraken hit the underside of a ledge, scraped along for an instant, noisily shearing off gear. Then something — maybe weakened by age — broke with a dull crack.

The shock wave hurled them like fragile shells. It deafened them, overloaded their lateral stripes. For many minutes it tossed them along the bottom, and when they came to rest, clinging to each other, the water was opaque with silt.

"It's blown apart! It's gone!" Calice was beside herself. A pink cloud

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from her leg wound swirled in the murky water around them, and Ariste tried to calm her.

Finally she stopped weeping. "I've lost. My one chance to prove to people that I'm right, and I lost."

"I destroyed it, didn't I?"

She hunched into a miserable ball, shaking her head, refusing to look at him. At length, when he began to wonder if she would ever forgive him, or ever speak to him again, she uncurled.

"No. I could never have gotten back. At least this way there's a witness to what it was. Maybe — maybe I can find pieces of it, if the murk ever settles."

"I'm sorry." A sense of devastation seeped into him.

"No. No. You did the right thing." Her voice was heavy. "You have more sense than I do."

They swam back, nearly silent. It was hard to find the way out of the canyon, even with Calice's maps. As they swam, Ariste sometimes tasted tears in the water — his own or his mother's.

Toward the end he had to pull her by her hair. She was semiconscious, mumbling about the strange humans they had seen.

"Mom, I'm seeing things. That can't be light from Sud de Chaleur yet, can it?"

Calice revived a bit. "I thought I was hallucinating. We're still a good kilometer outside the town."

They swam on, and found a school of townspeople, come to meet them outside the town. It was the glow from so many lanterns that they had seen. The mayor was there, Eubert Gres, Ruisse's family, the Filou family, many others.

Ruisse, her octopus clinging to her, swam forward. "I'm sorry, Ariste. I had to tell them."

Ariste felt embarrassed. Everyone would praise him for saving his mother. They would not realize he had destroyed the discovery that could have justified her life's work.

Eubert gathered his exhausted wife into his arms. Calice allowed herself to be comforted. "Well, Eubert, now even you can mock me."

A pang of anger shot through Ariste when he noticed Filou staring at him. But the boy's stare suggested respect, maybe even envy. Then Filou's father, the mayor, pushed forward. "Mock you? Nobody but you can explain."

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"Explain?" Calice was still despondent.

"We all felt it. It came from where you were. What did you see out there in the Dark Cold? Tell us. Explain."

"Explain what?"

"The shock wave."

Ariste watched a slow, private smile spread on Calice's face. The shock wave, indeed!

Calice pulled herself together. "It's complicated. I'm very tired and injured, too. Tomorrow, at the schoolhouse. Come at lunchtime. I'll tell you everything tomorrow."

The crowd swam around Calice and Ariste, escorting them to the town, to their home.

Ruisse floated at the outskirts of the crowd, her octopus in her arm. She watched Ariste with new admiration. Ariste tasted in the water the blood of the girl's new maturity.

"Ruisse." He extended his arm so their fingers touched. "Come home with me. I'll explain to you right now."

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If you take seriously books like Whitley Streiber's Communion, *this new Wayne Wightman story is likely to deeply offend you. But there is a certain ring of truth to the notion that people abducted by aliens are possibly stranger than the aliens themselves. . .*

Unnatural Strangers

By Wayne Wightman

SO HERE I am once more dealing with freaks. The world never runs dry when it comes to putting some geek at my front door, this one with a face like a well-used dartboard, wearing a huge, foul overcoat and white gardening gloves.

It was early evening in the summer, a few traces of orange sunset still in the treetops, and a mockingbird sang from inside the privet. I live in a nice neighborhood — a needed change from my previous two-room rental with barred windows and decorative lawn-drunks. This had been a pleasant afternoon, and I'd been passing the time by having some lazy, licentious thoughts about one Lenia Tsvetok.

Then the morf showed up. He didn't belong here — not in my life, my afternoon, or my neighborhood.

"They told me to find you," he said syrupily. He had this kill-me-if-you-want-I-don't-care look on his face and bits of dried minestrone on the front of his coat. I hoped it was minestrone. "They said they had a message for you."

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"Tell you what. I'll give you a dollar, and you go across the street and give Mrs. van Winkelplek the message." Mrs. van Winkelplek was deaf and was known to throw herb tea at people whose existence confused her.

"It's a message for you," he slurred. "From them."

In my heart I knew that somewhere new mothers were nursing their babies . . . a little kid had just hit his first home run . . . and Lenia Tsvetok was sitting around being her amazing self . . . but where I stood there was no joy, and I was about to receive a message. From *them.*

I made one last try. "I'll give you a beer — an *imported* beer — if you'll go away."

"A whut?"

I ran a quick check on myself: I had (a) suggested he talk to Mrs. van Winkelplek; I had (b) offered a bribe; so next on the list had to be (c) intimidation.

"You're in a lot of danger standing here — you know that?"

He cocked his head and squinted at me, as though I were losing focus. "Do I know . . . whut?"

"This neighborhood is patrolled by ex-members of the Paraguayan secret police — guys who were discharged for using excessive force. They don't carry guns — they carry chain saws."

"Pair of . . . whut?"

Perhaps the minestroned gentleman resided in a world not quite like our own. Perhaps he had been dropped off by the mothership. Perhaps he needed to take up residence at the local slamhole, where no doubt he would easily make friends.

He used both hands to dig a wad of paper out of one of his coat pockets. Slowly, with those white gardening gloves on his hands, he unwadded it, cocked his head as he studied it, and said, "You're Eeps. They said they got a message for you."

He had my name. He knew me. It was time to focus on survival. As an internal footnote, let me quickly point out that as Sebastian Eeps, I had discovered that running from fear is like trying to run from a grinning dog, except that fear runs faster. When frightened, Eeps tightens down his guts. Eeps goes to work.

"So," I said to this blackhead-ridden Caucasian individual who wore big white gloves, "exactly who is sending me this message?"

"*Them.*"

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"I see; yes, I understand. That bunch. *Them.*"

He nodded. "I read about you," he said dully. "I knew you'd understand."

So he not only knew me, he knew *of* me. I occasionally got involved in the Unusual and the Bizarre for the sole purpose of writing it up and selling it to science fiction magazines as fiction. I took real events, presented them as fiction, and facing me here was not the first gork who assumed that my "fiction" was secretly true — and meanwhile I was getting rejection letters from editors saying, "This is too weird for us — how about writing a robot story?" Is it no wonder I should feel like an outsider amongst my own kind?

"You had . . . experiences," he said around his dead tongue. "So *they're* sending you the message."

"I got a question," I said. He gave me a deadface stare. I waved my hand in front of his face, and when he blinked, I continued. "Without using pronouns, who are these *they*-people?"

"Aliens."

"How stupid of me not to know that. Aliens, of course. Are these the big aliens or the little aliens?"

"Uh. The little ones."

"Right. The bald little slick-headed things with eyes like sucked-on jujubes."

"You b-better not let them. . . ." He seemed to be getting nervous, so I attempted to change the subject.

"Is that minestrone?"

"Whut?"

"Let's get back to reality, loosely speaking. I've got a number two question. These slick-head aliens, what's their message?"

He stared at me a full thirty seconds, but a few finger snaps in front of his nose, and he started blinking again.

"Oh yeah," he said, "they told me you prob'ly wouldn't believe me unless I showed you this first. I was supposta do this first."

He slowly took off his gloves and began unbuttoning his overcoat, and I started seeing my life pass before my eyes.

Twenty minutes earlier I'd been considering calling up Lenia Tsvetok, to offer to eat litchi fruit off her naked and nubile body. Now I was standing at my front door watching a zipperhead open up his overcoat, and expecting to see him pull out a machete, a shotgun, or some horrible

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Haitian device of dismemberment. . . .

He spread open the coat, and he didn't have any weapons in there, but this fellow was all messed up. He weighed ninety pounds max, one nipple was missing, and he looked like he'd had five or six major operations on most of his larger organs. But strangely — and I am one to notice these strange things — the purple incisions, big mothers that they were, did not have the normal surgical cross-stitch. Peculiar, I thought, beginning to feel my dinner move around as I gazed at the charming sight.

"Look," he said, picking at the edge of his nipple scar.

"Please, no demonstrations."

"They said for you to look."

"Really — *you don't have to!*" *My dinner threatened to become a rerun.*

But he pinched up a bit of skin below his absent nipple and peeled the edge of it down. It made a little Velcro-like sound as it separated from the underlying . . . gad . . . the underlying metal surface that covered a section of his rib cage. The plate was about the size of my hand and glistened with straw-colored intercellular fluid.

"See?" he said, looking blearily up at me. "They said you'd believe me if I showed you."

I figured that since I was in the business of the Unusual & Bizarre, I should let him come in the house and maybe sit in a chair or lean against the wall. Perhaps he wouldn't leave any diseases behind.

"All right. Come inside here. Want a beer?"

"I don't drink anymore," he slurred, idly scratching at the blackheads on his cheek.

"I'd like to quit myself." I popped a cap and poured half a Kirin down my throat. "O.K, you've convinced me you've had some unusual surgery — but so's my Aunt Norelga. I grew up in Missouri, see, so weirdness doesn't affect me like it does most normal people. So you claim some little Hollywood-type aliens sent you to find me, to tell me they have a message. So what's the message — like in simple nonmystical words with as few pronouns as possible."

"Uh. O.K." He cleared his throat. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" I considered becoming extreme. "Give me the whole story and stop picking at your damned cheek."

"They got me last night. Out at the stockyard, this big light, this big beam, come down. It sucked me up. Then they did this stuff. After cutting

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on me, they go, 'Find Eeps. Tell him we got a message.' So I go, 'O.K., I will.' I guess. . . ." He squinched up his face as though he might be thinking. "I guess so's you could be ready. I have to be going now," he said, standing up and shambling toward the door. "I got to be meeting the boys over at the bus station. Then we go to the mission for dinner." He suddenly turned and grinned at me. It was frightening. "They supposedly got the TV fixed today," he said. "We can watch 'The Big Question' tonight. It should be pretty good."

"Let me get this straight," I said, following him to the door but staying out of his reach. "You've been picked up by aliens, talked to by aliens, cut up by aliens; you carry messages for aliens; and you eat at some mission and look forward to watching game shows?"

"Wull, just 'The Big Question'. . . . It's relaxing. Being a bum can be very tiring." He held his hand out to shake mine. A couple of his fingernails were missing, and his thumb wasn't all there, but I didn't see any open sores, so I shook with him. It gave me the creeps. In fact, I got a complete shiver from it.

I STOOD THERE over the bathroom sink, already having washed my hand three times in soap and hot water, but I still had the creeps from touching the guy. I doused my hand with rubbing alcohol for good measure, and then finished off with a splash of peroxide. I couldn't shake this extremely wormy feeling after having touched the guy. . . . It was a physical revulsion that was about as subtle as a handful of chicken guts. I felt like I'd been touched by Real Nastiness.

I sat down in the living room and stared at the chair where he had sat. Without second thoughts, I took it out to the far corner of the yard and threw it on a pile of lawn clippings. It would have to be burned.

I had another beer and tried to calm down. So what was going on? . . . I seemed to spend half my life trying to answer that one.

Was this just some random harassment by your average geek on the street? Was my TV suddenly going to begin picking up prime-time programming from alien chickenheads?

The answer was not long in coming. Before I could finish the beer, I got the number ten jitters.

I had to stand up. I had to move around. I had to . . . *get the car keys.* This was it. Something was coming through on all channels. O.K., I'm getting the car keys.

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Get in the car. All right.

Start the thing up. Yes, sir, it's humming and thrumming.

Turn on the lights. Lights are on.

What in the hell was going on? Was I possessed?

Back out and turn right. Backing out . . . turning right.

Drive to the corner; turn left. No problem.

Had I become psychotic without noticing? Had madness crept up on me like a thief in the night?

Turn right. Turning right, no sweat. Drive, it said, and I drove.

It wasn't a voice in my head. Something had tuned into Motor Central, and I found out what I was going to do only about a third of a second before it happened. Thinking was still my business, but thinking didn't seem to have too much to do with any of my actions . . . which was not too different from normal life, I suppose.

But I was out of control. I wasn't responsible. So what the hell. There was a three-day weekend coming up, something I wanted to be alive to enjoy, so, having no alternatives, I decided to go with it. If you have an alien presence in you — or your basic possessive psychosis — why thrash around and be undignified? Why not enjoy the scenery?

It was a nice evening for a drive out into the country. Wobbly fences with redwing blackbirds standing on the posts and watching me go by . . . lumpy pastures with full-uddered Guernseys plodding toward their barns . . . walnut orchards where it was already full night beneath their heavy limbs . . . and the sky — copper at the horizon, a layer of yellow above that, creamy white that blended into blue, into marine blue, and then into blue-black. If a person had to be possessed, this was one of the better evenings for it.

Right turn. I'm turnin', boss; watch this body do it.

It was a potted little road with peach orchards on both sides . . . the road bridged a couple of irrigation canals where hyacinths lined the edges . . . left turn, another quick right . . . and I was in the driveway of a prim, boxy little white house, clapboard siding, with a lot of ten- and fifteen-year-old Fords and Chevys parked around, several of which had decaying memorabilia of the sixties hanging from the mirror or lying on the seats — love beads, head belts, ratty God's-eyes, and well-used Krisnamurti books. A few of the newer cars had current parking stickers from the university, one from a lawyer's office, and another from a hospital. So what kind of

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mix of people was this? And why was I getting weird instructions to join them?

I started to knock on the screen-door frame, but a middle-aged hippie lady with long, straight hair pulled open the door. She didn't tilt her head up at me — she just turned her eyes up and looked at me from the underside of her eye ridges, kind of like a dog that's used to being hit when it's called.

"Yes?" she asked slowly.

"I was, uh, sent here, or maybe brought here, by . . . *them*."

"Oh!" She smiled and turned her face up to me and unhooked the screen. "Come in, come in." The place smelled of patchouli and mulled wine. "I'm Jonquil Chablis. And you are—?"

Jonquil Chablis? Against better judgment, I gave my real name. "Sebastian Eeps," I said. "Please don't call me Sebastian. Eeps is fine."

"Everyone's already here," she said as she led me through the 1930s kitchen. It had a lot of that tiny hexagonal tile on the counter, like you used to see in bus-station toilets. "Right this way." The noises got louder — giggling and high-pitched laughing, cups clunking on wood surfaces, furniture squeaks and several voices, tinny and flat-toned ones, and someone chattering shrilly while another voice prompted, "Yes? Really? Yes? *No!*"

And they were in there, all right. Geekorama deluxe. Five "men" and six "women." Bell-bottoms were back, a few paisley neckerchiefs, two guys in tired polyester suits with a lot of oil in their hair leaned over the coffee table while they ate candied walnuts from a plate, and the two women who weren't timewarped hippies wore big, stiff-looking wigs and tight floral-print dresses. And they were all happy as clams, just chattering away and waving their hands around, and everyone was agreeing with everyone.

"This is our annual meeting," Jonquil said to me.

"Meeting of what?"

"You don't know?"

"No. It wasn't entirely my idea to come here. I just did what I was told."

"Ohhh," she said. "I seeee."

"So what's it a meeting of?"

"We're all abductees. By aliens."

Abductees? I took another look at the gang. Abductees. By aliens.

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"We've all met the aliens," Jonquil said. "And they've experimented on most of us."

That's when I started to listening to what they were actually saying.

One of the women with big hair explained, "When they stuck the probe into my pancreas, there was no pain at all, but when they ran the vibrating mechanisms down through the artery in my neck, well, dear, I could hardly hold still."

Indeed.

"We've all met the aliens," Jonquil said. "And they've *experimented* on most of us."

"They just come to your door, ring the bell, or what?"

"Well, I don't think anyone's been approached *that* way, but let me check. People? Friends?" The chatter died away. "Have any aliens come to your houses, rung your doorbells, or come inside?"

The polyester guys furrowed their brows. The floral-print ladies tapped their fingers on their lips as they thought a moment, and then a chorus of, "No," "Not me," and, "Not that I remember" piped back at us.

"Thank you everyone," Jonquil announced. "Thank you. You make Mr. Eeps feel at home now. You know how it is with a party," she said to me. "I have to play hostess now. You just mix and mingle. We're all friendly people. I'll bring you some wine, O.K.?"

"Fine." O.K., I thought, so I'm here; now what's the message?

Whatever had forced me to drive here was apparently leaving me to figure things out on my own. Was I supposed to talk to members of this collection? I felt like the mottled calico cat I could see peeking its face from under the gray three-cushion sofa where Mr. and Mr. Polyester sat, hanging their four ankles in front of the cat's nose. The cat looked wide-eyed and nervous, out of place, like it would rather be under a car chewing on a rat. Almost like me.

"Mr. Eeps?" It was one of the floral-print ladies with the big strawberry-blonde wig. It had begun.

"Yes."

"I'm Aggie Keller Kirkham, from Sacramento. Are you interested in hearing accounts of our abductions?"

"Oh yes, certainly." Jonquil returned and handed me a Bullwinkle cup

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of sweet mulled wine. Come on, alien presence, I was thinking, tell me what to do.

Ms. Kirkham began with a deep breath. "About three years ago, I suppose it was, when I was traveling down Highway 99 and was almost to Turlock — you know where that is, I suppose — well, near this grain-processing place. . . ."

I was tuning out rapidly, but at the same time, something else was tuning in.

While Ms. Kirkham rattled on about being sucked out of her car and having the slick-heads stick needles in her — and she was having a nice but serious time telling me all this — I could feel the rest of her life —what it was like to be Aggie Keller Kirkham from Sacramento when she wasn't being examined by aliens or drinking mulled wine and eating brownies with fellow abductees. And it was grim.

Her eyes were bright as she showed me vague scars on her arms where she said the needles went in, but somewhere back of that was a heavy clot of loneliness, of gloom and solitude, where nothing happened but some miserable daily routine punctuated by a yammering black-and-white TV set and a walk to a nearby dime store to wander the aisles for an hour and a half, examining the hair sprays and spools of thread and the picture frames.

Fortunately, the waves of sadness faded as quickly as they came.

". . . so frightening," she was saying, "but when we have our annual abductee meetings, I feel more at home than I do at home, you know? Horrible or frightening or incomprehensible things happen to everyone," she clucked, "and it just takes a little courage, I guess, to say, 'Hi-ho, it just happened to happen to *me* this time.' You should meet Emily. Emily's our brave one."

Emily was their weird one. Emily was about twenty-eight and had lush, rich, curly brown hair, skin as perfect as the finest latex, eyes the color of heart redwood, and hands that could model rings in a jeweler's magazine. The rest of her could have been in the annual issue of *The Best of Slik Chix*, but one look at Emily, and you knew that a lot of her wiring had blown out. She would start some graceful movement with her hands, and then, every thirty seconds or so, zzzzt, she'd flail her arm or grinch up her face, and one eye would wad shut or a corner of her mouth would try to pull back to one of her ears. And she was really happy to meet me.

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"Mr. Eeps! I've read —" zzzzt — "about your experience with the Televoids. Have you had any subsequent contacts with extraterrestrials?"

I didn't want to get into all the details about cattle mutilations or how I'd ended up in Barrow, Alaska, and had been confined for two months with a bunch of burned-out politicians and horny evangelists. So I just said, "No.'

"They took me the first time two years ago this" — zzzzt — "this March," Emily said. "My alien daughter is almost one now."

"Alien daughter?"

"Yes. They named her Polynomia, and she has the finest golden hair." So, with fifteen or twenty *zzzzts*, Emily told me her story, and it wasn't very pleasant.

Not only was I hearing how aliens stuck painful metal suction tubes up her and stole her eggs, I was sensing the dismal life that filled up the rest of her days, the bowling alley manicure shop where she worked, the yellowed walls, the cracked and creaky barber's chair her clients had to sit in, and how she tried to pretend her shop was "quaint" instead of dilapidated — and there was something else hovering back there, something about a cheap abortion when she was sixteen that had left her sterile.

"I can't wait to see her again," Emily concluded. "Even though the aliens always strap me down and cut pieces out of me, and they" — zzzzt — "never use anesthetic, but as much as it hurts, I can't wait to go back and see her again."

"Good luck," I said stupidly. I was beginning to get sincerely depressed. Jonquil came around and refilled my cup of mulled wine, and led me to the sofa where Mr. and Mr. Polyester sat drawing pictures of tubes on a napkin.

"Mr. Eeps," one of them said, "we were just drawing the kinds of implements that were used on us when we were in the capture of the ETs."

"These look like the kinds of things they use to suck fat out of a person," I said.

"It wasn't fun, I tell you. My name's Johnny Thorman. I'm in forklift tires."

"An interesting image," I said, shaking his offered hand.

"I'm Freddy Burkett. Refrigeration."

"And you've both been abducted?"

They nodded in unison.

"Tell me if I'm wrong, but from what I've heard this evening so far, I get

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the impression that your experiences haven't been entirely pleasant."

"They took one of my eyes out," Freddy said. "The left one. This little guy walked over to me — I was strapped down, y'see — he walked over, held up his finger for me to look at, and the finger just kind of *flat*tened out, y'see, like a butter knife."

I started picking up the same empty gloom from Freddy as I had from the others . . . a warehouse, a maze of cluttered shelves, dusty copper tubing, the smell of burned-out motors . . . nothing to do for five or six hours a day but look busy. . . .

"And then he just slipped that little finger right in, between my eyelid and my eyeball, and popped it out. It made a kind of wet sucking noise when it came loose, like when you tear the inside out of an orange. Let me tell you, that hurt. That was big-time owwee."

"I bet," Johnny said.

"I could still see through it, too. The little guy turned it around so I could look into the empty socket."

"Alien humor," Johnny said. "I think they're finding out how we work, how we react to things. Who knows what they'll do with us next . . . eat us, make pets out of us, or just write us up in a guidebook and fly away."

Freddy nudged him. "Tell him about the scream experiment they did on you."

"Oh yeah. Pain tolerance, I guess." He began an intense narrative about the various gauges of wire they hooked to his head, and how they fed him illusions of his own dismemberment so they could measure the volume of his screams. At least that's what he figured their motivation was.

But I couldn't pay that much attention, because I was picking up the overwhelming loneliness of selling forklift tires. Day after day of meeting customers he sometimes really liked, but then he had to lie to them, cut himself off from their friendship by lying and telling them that their old tires were dangerous, that the tread was made of a recalled rubber that was liable to self-combust, that the wheel was metal-fatigued, or that it wasn't rated high enough for the job; and I could see how every night Johnny would pray all the way home to his apartment that the woman who lived next door to him would be taking her garbage out and would smile at him when they met . . . and how Johnny tried to gas himself about once a year, but could never stand the smell long enough to die. . . .

"I gotta go now," I said, standing up.

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"Oh, please stay for the sing-along," Emily pleaded, hanging onto my arm. "Then we have cheesecake and homemade ice cream."

"I don't think I could, really. I have to get home and give my dog his insulin shot."

"Ohh, I see. Well, the fun part of the party's just going to begin — you'll miss it. Come back later if you want. We carry on till all hours."

One of the polyester boys was already hammering out "Yesterday" on the piano, and Emily was leading them.

Yesterday, contact seems so far awaay,
Though we suffered, we're here todaay,
Together because of yesterdaay.

"I guess I'll have to let you go now," she said, pulling away and going back to the others. Her latent depression had boiled off her like water off a griddle . . . a father dead of a brain tumor, a suicide mother . . . but at the moment, she wasn't happy — she was joyous. "Bye now," she called, waving at me. The light shone like neon on her square-framed granny glasses. "Bye! Come back if you can! Bye, Mr. Eeps!"

I pushed open the front door and walked out to stand in her front yard, surrounded by the steel carapaces of beat-up cars and the dark, full shapes of old trees where summer insects chittered and screeked and ate each other.

Inside the house the yellow lights glowed warmly, and I could see several of the abductees opening and closing their mouths in unison as they sang their private song. Misfits, incompetent suicides, pathetic jabbermouths that went home to nothing. . . . They were laughable, easily ridiculed, a lot like me, and they were having a great time.

They had friends here. At Jonquil's house they were at home. Whatever emotional sink had dismalized their days, it wasn't bothering them now. They were in there singing their hearts out. So was that the message?

I stood there in the dark a moment longer, feeling as depressed as I had been when I was incarcerated with those vapor-brained politicians and evangelists. I was depressed now because I was watching a bunch of "abductees" in there having the time of their lives, and here I was, your basic regular-type guy, seeker of action, entrepreneur of the Unusual &

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Bizarre, out in the yard envying them. Bummer.

HALFWAY HOME, I realized I wasn't driving anymore. *It* was driving . . . over to the southside of town, along the railroad tracks, past outdoor lots where people sold caved-in appliances for a living, and then my hands turned the wheel into the dirt parking lot of The Mission of the Wanderer. Two drunks slept sprawled on the front step, their grimy, stubbled faces lit a faint pink by the feeble neon tubing that outlined the cross above the door.

Maybe the message was here. Maybe there was no message. Maybe I was only getting jerked around. Again.

I stepped over the drunks and went inside where the air was heavy with alcoholic breath and stale clothes. Half a dozen raggy guys clustered at the back, laughing and clapping their hands as they watched a small black-and-white TV.

"Good program?" I asked. By now I just wanted to get this business over with.

"Yeah." One of them turned around. It was Mr. Disease-bag, the bringer of alien messages, but he was looking considerably livelier than he had a couple of hours ago. "It's 'The Big Question.' We know this guy. On the program there."

I focused on the small screen.

"All right," said the tinny voice of the announcer, "here's *your* Big Question: If you could be on worldwide television for thirty seconds, what would you do or say?"

The camera switched to the contestant. He was an old guy dressed in baggy clothes that had been out-of-date for twenty years, and behind his soft lips he probably didn't have any teeth. From years of muscatel, his face twitched sloppily as he formed his words. "Well," he mumbled, "I'd tell everbody not to be afraid of the aliens. They're everwhere. They're harmless. I run into 'em alla time."

The missions bums whooped and slapped their legs. "Sammy did it!"

"'Not to be afraid of the aliens!'" the host shouted, waving one hand around over his head. "Audience, how do you rate *that*?"

Numbers flashed at the bottom of the screen: *40 . . . 57 . . . 62 . . . 68 . . . 71. . . .*And then they froze at 73. A harsh firehouse buzzer sounded, and the host suddenly looked like his mother had died.

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"Dopes," said one of the bums.

"Sammy," said the host, "I'm *sorry*, I really am. *I* thought it was a good answer. I thought it was a *great* answer . . but our audience, well, I guess they're harder to please than I am. But Sammy, we here at 'The Big Question' have some consolation prizes for you. . . . A fabulous GE hair dryer! And —"

Someone turned the TV off.

"They should give him the big money," said the guy with the blackheads.

"At least he got to answer the big question," one of the others groused.

"Now *I* have a big question," I said. "Ever since you showed up at my doorstep this evening telling me that aliens were going to send me a message, some pretty unusual things have been happening, although none of them have involved receiving a message. And through no fault of my own, here I am at your swank little private club. So? What's the deal? Is there a message?"

"It was right there on the TV," said the toothless guy with the Frank Sinatra hat. "Sammy said it. You normal people oughta listen better."

That certainly caught me off-guard. This guy was calling me *normal*!

"'Don't be afraid of the aliens' is the message? That's original. Truthfully, I 'm a bit more afraid of cabbage than I am of aliens. But I met some people this evening who don't think your alien friends are such nice guys."

"Jeesh," one of the bums said. "Whanchew give this guy a clue, somebody."

I turned on Mr. Blackhead. "What about you — all those scars — you look like a victim in *Alien Playmates with Machetes.*"

"What scars?" He stood up, opened his coat, and flashed me. True. No scars. My mouth probably dropped open.

"Want some sherry?" asked the guy in the Sinatra hat.

"You don't get it, do you?" Mr. Blackhead asked. He held his hand toward me, and I felt a creepy, jumpy feeling in my shoulder. "Hold out your hand," he said.

So I held it out. It felt like worms were slithering down my arteries toward my fingertips. I wanted to scream, but I wasn't going to be a wimp.

"Now lookit this," he said. He took my hand in his mangled fingers, bent it back a little, and through a bloodless pinhole on the bottom of my wrist, a slick, hair-fine wire snaked out of me.

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Like a goddamned heartworm or leech or something, this thing came out of me, coiled up into a pencil-sized roll, and dropped into his waiting palm. "Thanks," he said.

I wanted to throw up. "You — You put that in me this morning. . . ! You violated my body!" Gradually, slowly, about as subtly as a stroke, it dawned on me. "You . . . you're. . . ."

"Heh-heh!"

"Booga-booga."

"Yup. We're them." They all grinned and showed me their rotten teeth. "Well, most of us are."

"I'm not," said the guy with the sherry. "I'm a drunk."

"O.K.," I said, not about to be cowed — I mean, after all, I had gone hand to hand with defrocked evangelists and discredited politicians. "Then explain to me why all those people have this idea that you cut on them and stole that woman's eggs and flipped the guy's eye out and turned it around so he could see the empty socket?"

"We're just tryna help," one of the scuzzes said. "They needed to feel special. They didn't have anything going for 'em, you know?"

"So you cut on these people, sucked out that woman's eggs, and flipped out the guy's eye? You're disturbed — you know that? You *people*, if I may use that word in this context, are all messed up. That's number ten twisted, messing with people's bodies so they'll have something to talk about at parties."

The guy in the hat gulped his sherry and didn't bother wiping his chin. "Lozza people love talkin' about their operations. My mother, chrize, she'd do anything to go under the knife. She trya marry a doctor so she get free operations."

The blackhead-ridden individual shrugged and made a "See?" face. "We figure if we're going to stay here, we need to pay here."

"So we're like your zoo, and hacking people up is how you pay for your entertainment."

"But we don't really do these things," he said, flashing me a bit of his chest where I'd seen the scars. "We just make a few, um, uh. . . ."

"Mystic gestures," the drunk said.

"Right. Mystic gestures. We figure if we have to live here, the least we can do is make a few mystic gestures to help a few people out. We want you to tell our story, Eeps."

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"People are gonna hate your guts," I said.

"Well, how about yourself, Eeps? You do the same thing we do. You write all that weird crap because you think people are pathetic and need a few laughs." He rolled his eyes and said, "Booga-booga! Welcome to Earth, fellow alien."

What could I do? What could I say? It occurred to me that perhaps I'd been using the decongestants a little too frequently. Perhaps I needed a rest.

One of the characteristics of wisdom is to know when to get the hell out of a situation.

I stepped over the doorstep drunks as I went back to my car. The air was filled with the smell of tomato paste from the processing plant a mile away, and across the half-vacant lots, sodium lights made the ground yellow, the color of dried mustard. In one of the lots, a mangy German shepherd loafed between the bent hulks of old washers and dryers, paused, and howled a couple of moans at the glary, tomato-smelling sky. His ancestors once tracked caribou across the tundra and hunted mammoths through icy forests — yet now he thought *this* was normal, sniffing refrigerators and peeing on washing machines. So where did that leave me? Standing in the middle of Mondo Dismo, wondering where I fit in.

Not really knowing when to quit, I stuck my head back inside the mission. "You said, 'if we *have* to live here.' Do I detect an implication there that you may not have any choice in the matter?"

They all looked a little embarrassed. "Well, ah, back home. . . ."

"Scumbags of the stars!" the drunk cackled. "They got thrown out! Hyak! Cou'n even make it as aliens!" He broke up laughing and spewed sherry all over the dead TV.

"Sorta, yeah," said my pustuled friend. "Kinda like that."

I figure it's never too late in the day to join the crew.

I took a drive back out in the country to Jonquil's place. They were glad to see me, and still had some cheesecake left. We told weird stories till two in the morning, and I felt right at home, like a bum in a mission, like a dog in a junkyard, like a freak among friends.

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Madeleine Robins wrote "Cuckoo" (September 1984). She tells us that she is now working at Tor Books and writing at glacial speed, with a historical romance just reissued by Fawcett. It's a pleasure to welcome her back with this first rate story about a future dealing with the problems of life extension.

Mules

By Madeleine E. Robins

TENNIEL SAT IN one shabby chair, the doctor in the other, and they shadowboxed. Over the doctor's shoulder, a hologram, a grimly festive image of people swimming and running on a tropical beach, shimmered distractingly. Palm fronds pulsed in a silent breeze; sunbathers laughed soundlessly. Goals to aim for, Tenniel thought. He stared at the hologram and chattered about some minor event to fill up the empty time.

Periodically the doctor would interrupt. "How did that feel?"

Each time the answer was the same. "I don't really know."

Tenniel pulled his gaze away from the surfers and blue skies and examined the doctor: thin brown hair, mustache, brown eyes that tilted down at the corners sadly. Any age past thirty. He found himself wondering, as he always did: Mule? Lifer? The notion of being treated by a psychiatrist who was mortal was an unsettling one.

Mariclaire was in the apartment when Tenniel got there, dressed in the

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faded coverall she called her painting suit. She stood before a large canvas, examining the gelid blobs of paint on her palette, seeing something in them that Tenniel did not see. Oil was a demanding, old-fashioned medium for a painter, but Mariclaire loved the paints, the smell, even the mess. He recognized the painting; Mariclaire had been working on that canvas for years. Mostly she took it out, stared at it, and, at the end of the day, put it away again.

"Hi." She did not look up from the palette.

"Hi. Is that *Blue Hell* again?" He nodded at the canvas on his way past.

"I got a sudden idea about the composition. Now I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think—" He looked from her to the painting and was dimly exasperated. "I think you should scrap the damned thing or finish it and start something new."

She pushed her thick reddish bangs away from her eyes and stared at him, trying to figure him out: kidding or no.

"Mair—" He struggled for words and watched from some far place as the outside Tenniel approached her. "You can work something into the ground, you know."

She put her palette aside and moved away from him. "I've heard. But I don't think that's what I'm doing. Some things take time."

"Some things take forever."

Mariclaire watched him coolly. "Aaron, where did all this hostility come from?"

A fair question with no answer. "I don't know," he said uneasily. As suddenly as impatience had flooded him, it ebbed. "I'm sorry," he said, and, as a peace offering: "Are you hungry?"

"Not really." She picked up her palette again, gave him one more appraising, unsettled glance, and returned to contemplation of her painting while Tenniel browsed aimlessly in the kitchen for something to snack on. Just killing time: he had a class in an hour.

"So where were you this morning?" Mariclaire asked casually.

"At the Howard Clinic, seeing a psychiatrist." He watched her as he said it. She did not turn, but a muscle tightened in her jaw, and the clean line of her forehead was broken by a frown.

Mariclaire reached for a bag of linseed oil and hesitated for a few moments before squeezing a few drops of the stuff onto a crimson blob of

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paint. "I see," she said, as if she had said, *Now I understand.* "Again?"

"Again."

"Is there any point to this, or are you just playing some academic game with yourself? Do you get supertenure points for staring into your navel?"

"Now who's being hostile?"

"I don't like this. It's embarrassing."

"I'm sorry if it embarrasses you. It doesn't embarrass me. I'm trying to find something—"

"What? What do you need that you can't find by yourself, with enough time and thought? Arron, what's the point of stirring things up?"

"I'm not trying to stir *you* up. I feel—" He waved one hand, frustrated by the puzzle of needing her to understand, and by his inability to make the problem clear to her.

Mariclaire ignored his hand. She studied her palette again, intently, as if there were a message written among the daubs of paint. "You should leave for your class soon," she said. She pushed her bangs back again and kept her eyes on the palette, ostentatiously absorbed in her work.

After a moment, Tenniel took up the disk reader with his notes in it and slung its strap over his shoulder. For a moment he hesitated, then he picked up a folder of paper illustrations he had promised to a student, and left her alone in the apartment.

He arrived on campus forty minutes early for his seminar and had tea with Nina Diaz, another supertenured member of the history faculty. In the faculty lounge, a comically traditional room paneled with dark wainscoting and antiqued red wallpaper, they gossiped quietly about department politics, the new staff and new students, making the easy judgments of people who had seen decades of new students and new staff. Nina left first; when Tenniel walked to his seminar later, he looked through a window and saw her lecturing, pacing across the front of the room, sawing the air with her right hand to make a point.

The classroom was almost full when Tenniel arrived, students gathered around the table talking quietly among themselves. It was his favorite class: enrollment was limited, and attendance was required; there was no broadcast to nonresident students. Tenniel set his reader on the table and sat down. The woman to whom he had promised the drawings sat halfway around the table; Tenniel looked at the name he had printed

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neatly on the folder: Cate German. He waved the folder to catch her attention and let her know he had not forgotten. She smiled.

"O.K." Tenniel looked from face to face, gauging reactions, drawing them all in. An old teacher's trick; when he got to Cate German, she smiled as if she had caught him at it. "We were talking about the proliferation of religious cults in the late twentieth century. Stipulate a premillennial panic — probably the more potent because the people who recognized it felt that it was some kind of cultural relic. Add the fact that ecological irresponsibility and overpopulation were beginning to really take a toll — remember, this was before emigration off-planet. So we begin to see jihads, death pacts, an increase in ideological tensions even between allies. To understand the kind of frenzy that overtook the human race at the end of the tenth and twentieth centuries, the neatest metaphor is Jagadowicz's: a person faced with a terminal illness. In the pre-Radin era, there were considerable studies done on the psychology of the terminal patient. How does our hypothetical man-as-culture react to his imminent death?"

The woman to Tenniel's left, a thin, narrow-eyed blonde, looked profoundly uncomfortable. "You're comparing premillennial mankind to someone who's . . . *dying*?" She stumbled awkwardly over the last word.

"To someone who thinks he's dying," Tenniel corrected.

A frisson of distaste went through the room. Tenniel shook his head. "Come on, people, it's only a word. Yes?" — to a dark, thin, wild-eyed man sitting a few seats away.

"Denial," the student suggested.

"Repentence," someone else offered.

"Urgency." "The need to find and appease his God." "Fear." "Sorrow."

"Absolute anarchy." Cate German's low-pitched voice cut through the murmurs of assent and suggestion. "Liberation."

"Liberation?" Tenniel prodded.

"If you know you're going to die — sooner rather than later — what's to stop you from doing what you want to do while you can? If you hate someone and want to kill him — go ahead. If you want to have sex with anyone, everyone who pleases you — why not? Why not take risks? The immediacy of death would be very liberating. How can you be punished more than dying? And you're doing that anyway."

A chorus of horrified protest rose up, and the woman was pressed to

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defend her opinions. Tenniel sat back to listen, occasionally suggesting or correcting, watching them. When the musical tones that signaled the class's end sounded, he waited for Cate German to come forward to pick up the illustrations. She was finishing a quiet argument with another student. Her long, honey-colored hair hung straight over her shoulders, scarcely stirring as she shook her head. Tenniel thought irrelevantly that he could almost sense the weight of her hair from across the room.

She joined him at last and flipped through the papers in the folder he handed her. She was working on a paper on propagandist art in the early twenty-first century. "Thank you for remembering. Oh yeah, this is great stuff." She tilted her head in the direction of the door. "You really got them with all that talk of d-y-i-n-g."

"Sooner or later any course that deals with pre-Radin sociology will touch on d-y-i-n-g." He gave it the same ironic lilt as she did; it was, after all, only a word. "It's easy to forget how important personal mortality was."

The woman nodded, smiling. Tenniel felt her attention keenly; her focus was distracting, powerful; he was suddenly aware of the way he was standing, his expression, what he wore. Her eyes were a very clear blue-green, set wide in a triangular face, and her smile was generous. She was nearly as tall as Tenniel.

"Yes. Well," she said after a moment. "Thanks for the pictures." She paused; her smile deepened. "Dr. Tenniel, could I ask you to look over my notes and outline sometime? For my honors thesis?"

He was flattered. "Bring them next week," he suggested.

"It's not too much trouble? Thank you." She smiled again and left him.

Tenniel watched her go, smiling himself.

"Were you married long the first time?" the psychiatrist asked him. The palm trees on the wall behind bobbed and waved like an echo.

"About fifteen years. That was —" Tenniel broke off uncomfortably. He still had no idea whether the other man was immortal or a mule; it made it difficult to know how to discuss Greta and his first marriage. "We met when I was thirty. She was twenty-three. She was — that is, she didn't respond to the Radin Treatment."

The doctor's left eyebrow hitched up slightly, the only reaction he seemed to permit himself. "She was mortal."

Tenniel found himself explaining, trying to make it clear, as if, after

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two hundred years, it really mattered. "We thought it would work out. I didn't realize how tough it would be for her, watching me stay the same. The first eight, ten years, it didn't matter. Really, I don't think it did. We were crazy about each other. But eventually we started fighting. Greta really hated me toward the end." He shuddered involuntarily at the distant memory. "I should have known better. If one of my friends had married a mu-mortal, I would have known better. I was just swept away."

The boxy tan room was silent for a few moments except for faint inhalations. Tenniel listened for the sound of a tropic breeze that did not come. "How did you feel about that?" the doctor asked at last.

"About Greta? It was two hundred years ago. It's sad, I suppose. . . ."

"No." The doctor shook his head. "How do you feel about knowing better now?"

Tenniel let the words sink in heavily, feeling a slow electricity as he considered the question. "I hate it," he said at last.

THAT AFTERNOON in his seminar, Cate German had shifted her seat at the table. Through the class, Tenniel was deeply aware of her nearness, two seats away; her concentrated focus when he was speaking; a waft of light, flowery scent when she shook her head. She asked questions from time to time, enough to keep Tenniel's attention peripherally on her. Stirred by her focus, he was brilliant himself, pulling references out of the air, making connections, heady with a scholar's love of his subject and communicating that love. The class responded. The room crackled with electricity. They stayed beyond class time, and when Tenniel finally adjourned the meeting, everyone left with a small reluctance.

"Dr. Tenniel? Will you be able to look at my notes?" She stood by the door with her reader tucked loosely under her arm. She smiled. "I'll bribe you with a cup of tea."

Tenniel remembered why he had kept the afternoon open. "I'll be with you in a minute." He shuffled disks together into a glittering pile, slid them into a case.

"Good class today. You got everyone involved."

"Some days it's like that," Tenniel smiled. What was he feeling? Goofy pleasure, avidness, the lingering rush of a good class. Cate German's odd, stirring presence. A remembered excitement he could not put a name to,

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as if anything could happen. "Thank you for bringing up Vatican III. I hate to pull all the rabbits out of the hat myself."

Cate raised her sandy eyebrows mockingly. "Showboating. I read ahead, that's all."

"Thanks anyway." They left the classroom amiably rehashing the class as they walked to the Student Center. Cate brought the tea while Tenniel settled at one of the tables, took the ordered stack of disks she had given him, and slipped the first into his reader. When she reached the table with a tray, two cups, and a large flask of hot tea, he had already scanned half the files on the first disk.

He read quickly, with the same excitement he had felt in class. The pleasure of encountering a good mind, a creative mind in his own field; he admired her way of putting together facts, drawing outrageous conclusions and making them stick; he was impressed. More, he was enjoying his own pleassure, and the subtle warmth of Cate's body near, but not too close, to his own.

"This is good," he said once, not looking up from the reader, almost afraid to meet her eyes. "This is very good." He drank his tea, reading, while Cate German sat beside him watching the younger students come and go.

After an hour, Tenniel looked up. "You've done very well. This is terrific." Still, he mentioned several sources she might check, questioned a point he thought not as tightly substantiated as the others. "I'd like to read the paper when you have it in draft. With notes this good — you should publish, you know."

"Publish? I hadn't thought about it." She laughed. "It's a thought."

"If you're going to start building up a reputation in the field," he began. "That is, you *are* in the history department, aren't you?"

She smiled. "No. Not officially. I'm a floater, still."

He let his astonishment show. "If you can do this kind of work — what are you doing in a graduate seminar if you aren't — why would you take my course?"

"It sounded interesting. Why not? If all the courses are as good as yours, maybe I'll apply to the history faculty for a fellowship." She met his eyes with an open blue-green stare.

Tenniel suddenly felt helpless, startled by the clarity of that look. He flushed. "Can we go somewhere?"

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Cate smiled again. "Yes."

Her flat was two rooms in a student habitat within bare walking distance of the campus. They spoke very little. If someone had asked him, Tenniel would have sworn there was an aura surrounding them, setting them off from the rest of the world. The low, jazzing sweep of hovercars; the spare gleam of campus buildings in the white afternoon light; the students in ones, twos, knots of three or four struggling along the carefully landscaped paths — everything around them seemed distant and sparkling and unnaturally real. The word *enchantment* occurred to Tenniel, and he rejected it hastily, embarrassed. The feeling remained.

In the passage outside her habitat, he watched Cate pass her palm over the lock to her door. She moved into the room and did a quick pirouette with her arms spread and hands open. "Welcome, Doctor."

"Aaron." He stepped inside and dropped his reader onto a chair by the door.

"Cate." She waved the door shut, looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then moved toward him. She put her arms up and around his neck, kissed him with deliberateness and thoroughness. Tenniel closed his arms around her, felt his hand tangle in her thick hair, pressed and moved against her.

He opened his eyes for a moment to see hers, blue-green and very close. "Well."

"Well?" she asked. Her right hand reached behind to pull Aaron's hand from her waist. She raised his fingers to her mouth and kissed them. "Come on, then. Life's too short to stand here all afternoon." The phrase was an echo of Mariclaire, but before he could think of her, Cate kissed him again and pulled him with her into the next room.

Later, in her bed, after the last sensitive ripples had ebbed, they lay almost touching, looking at one another. Cate looked young, in her early twenties, but Aaron himself looked no more than thirty-five. As if he were reading her, he examined the breadth of her forehead, the long, spiky brown lashes around her eyes. She was not beautiful, but she was lovely with the rich, surprising, imperfect charm of a desert at sunrise or a forest after rain. Poetry? he thought, bemused.

Cate raised her head up, propped on one flat palm, and asked, "So what is it like to live forever?" So she *was* young.

"I haven't lived forever yet," Aaron parried, playing with a lock of her hair.

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"I mean, to know you might."

Aaron closed his eyes and opened them again. No change, still the blue-green eyes intent upon his face; the rounded, soft breasts brushing against his chest; her full, swollen smile. So young. It was difficult to ask: "You're not?"

"I won't. Mortal. Mule," she said, challenging his pity. "Metabolically Unsuited to Life Extension. When I was five, they brought me to the Radin Clinic like everyone else; only, I'm one of the ones it doesn't work for. I was sick for a week, puking, fever, the works." Cate grimaced reminiscently; her tone was dry and detached. "So." She ran a finger from his shoulder to his navel. "What's it like? I know what being mortal's like. Tell me the story of your life."

Aaron felt a bubble burst, filling him with weird giddiness. Terror, and he felt like laughing, a combination of embarrassment and relief and lingering arousal. "Living a long time is just like living any other kind of time," he said at last. "The seconds don't expand or anything; you don't live differently. You just live more."

"Sounds good to me. Living more." She ducked her head and ran her tongue across his nipple. "Want to live a little more?" She smiled at him teasingly.

"Cate?" For a moment, Aaron ignored the excitement she roused in him. "Why me, this afternoon?"

She smiled. "Because I wanted to. Life's too short to sit on the fence. My life is, anyway. Come here." She kissed him, mock fierce. "Because I wanted to."

He mentioned Cate in his therapy meeting at the clinic, watching the doctor's impassive face and wondering if he might not have done better to opt for computer therapy instead. He did not mention Cate to Mariclaire. Tuesdays was busy, filled with the early visit to the clinic, his seminar, and Cate. Cate began to spill over into other days; the thought of her spilled into Aaron's working and writing time. Mariclaire did not seem to notice; had she asked about his absence, Aaron would have immediately told her about Cate — a new lover was not an extraordinary event for either of them. But Mariclaire was absorbed herself. She had started a new painting.

Aaron arrived home from a meeting one afternoon and found her work-

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ing energetically, working in blues and grays, long diagonals across a raw canvas. She was smiling to herself, humming a strand of aimless notes, concentrating. Aaron had to repeat his "hello" twice before she heard him.

"Hi." Her smile enlarged to include him. Aaron circled around her to view the canvas. "I just got the idea today. I'm really excited; I think I've really latched on to something." Her eyes remained jealously on the canvas. "Good class?"

"Yeah. Very good. You hungry?"

She looked at him sideways. "If you're cooking. I'm involved."

Aaron began to work in the kitchen, enjoying the texture of the foods, the cutting, measuring, cooking. Both he and Mariclaire enjoyed the process of making a meal, and saw no reason for the kind of timesaving kitchen that was no more than a productor, warmer, and a cabinet for dishes. The kitchen they had was as coolly spacious as the rest of the apartment, but old-fashioned, with utensils, pots, a rack of seasoning herbs they grew and dried together. "Can you tear yourself away for a while?" he asked at last. "Food's ready."

Mariclaire made one last, delicate daub on the canvas, then put the palette aside, cleaned up swiftly, and came to the table, brushing her bangs out of her eyes with the back of her hand. They ate slowly in companionable near-silence. After dinner, Aaron cleaned up and read for a time while Mariclaire went back to her painting. In the dark of the apartment, they made two islands of light: Aaron relaxed over the glow of his reader, Mariclaire straight-backed on a stool, flanked by two high-intensity lamps trained on her canvas. Finally, by silent agreement, Aaron turned off the reader and Mariclaire cleaned her brushes. They went to bed, made love, and slept side by side, companionably.

Sometime in the night, Aaron woke, thirsty, and went to get juice from the kitchen. As he passed the easel, he looked again at Mariclaire's new painting. It was undoubtedly strong, even this early in its creation. The colors were bold slashes fading upward to a shadowy mass at the upper right corner. An evocative skeleton, a sketch of what would come; it reminded him of something, but he was not sure of what. He poured some juice, looked at the painting again, and fancied the resemblance was gone. He went back to bed.

"I hear myself talking and it sounds fatuous. I sound like a seventeen-

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year-old kid or something, but it's true. This thing with Cate has changed — is changing — my life."

Aaron leaned back in the shabby chair, watching the doctor's face, refusing to be distracted by the hologram. Daring the doctor to agree or disagree, it hardly mattered to him which. Of late his sessions had been filled with Cate.

"Obviously you think these changes are good," the doctor said, and smiled slightly.

"Good? Hell, yes. It's like a romance. I whistle on the way to the university. I've been noticing things again, birds, faces, the color of the sky. Everything sparkles. That sense I had of losing something with the years, of not being connected anymore, indurative lack of affect—"

"You've been reading ahead in the text," the doctor said coolly. "Please don't borrow my terms."

"Not feeling anything, then. I feel things again. I feel wonderful."

"And how does Cate feel? The same?"

"Of course." Aaron paused. "I think so. She's working on an honors thesis, very exciting work. And we've both got other responsibilities, but . . . I think she feels the same."

"What does Mariclaire say about Cate?"

Aaron was surprised to feel himself flushing. "I haven't mentioned it to her." The doctor's eyebrows started to lift. "No, we've both gone through other lovers; that's not a problem. We've been together for a long time; it happens. I just haven't gotten around to mentioning Cate to her yet. They're different." It seemed important to make that clear. "Cate has me doing things, stuff I haven't tried in years. She takes years off me. I'm looking at everything fresh." He chuckled nervously. "She's taking me skiing this weekend."

The doctor raised both eyebrows. "Skiing? Downhill?"

"Yes. She wants to go speed-jumping next week. I'm thinking about it."

The question again; Aaron could see it coming. "And how do you feel about all this?"

He smiled. "Scared. Terrified. It's great."

The doctor smiled politely.

The sun hid behind a sullen gray overcast, a white circle that gave no warmth. Aaron shivered a little despite the warmsuit he wore; the air was

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still silver-cold on his face and in his lungs. His eyes were half-closed against the dull glare.

"Bracing," he said, a little less than enthusiastically, to Cate.

She laughed. "It's supposed to be. Come on, top of the mountain this time."

She had been edgily patient with him, giving him a chance to practice, remember ancient skills. Aaron had not tried downhill snow skiing in more than two centuries, since he had passed through what he thought of as his daredevil phase. Most lifers went through it; most survived it and learned caution. Well, he thought, watching as Cate started off for the airlift, to hell with caution. Seeing Cate, admiring the hungry gusto with which she attacked even a gentle slope, Aaron wanted that hunger for himself. He pushed off with one pole and followed her.

At the lift line, they stood with heads together, flirting dangerously with their eyes and words, their breath mingled. It seemed to Aaron that every smile was a private touch.

"Aaron? Hey, Aaron!"

It took him a moment to realize the voice was real and familiar. He raised his head and looked around to find Nina Diaz standing five feet behind him, dressed in an orange speedsuit and goggles. A dark, heavyset man was with her, less flashy in a warmsuit like Aaron's own. Nina introduced him as David Campoy.

"What are you doing here? I never knew you skiied."

"I haven't in centuries," he admitted. He slid one hand along Cate's shoulder to bring her into the conversation. "It's all Cate's fault." He introduced her. "Today skiing, next week speed-jumping. But you look — professional, almost. Have you been skiing long?"

"A couple of years." Nina laughed. "David is a slowpoke; he won't do the speed trails with me." The look she gave him was an edgy token of long-standing complaint.

"No interest in making a fool of myself," Campoy said. He seemed quite unaffected by Nina's obvious displeasure. "Or in coming home in a basket."

The line shifted forward again, and Cate nudged Aaron. "Come on, Aar. We're up next." She smiled blankly at Nina and Campoy. "Maybe we'll meet you on the speed trails."

Aaron nodded. "Yeah, maybe. Nina, Dave." He let Cate lead him toward the bench that would carry them up the mountain.

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Aaron managed skiing well enough, he thought. Some vestige of the years of caution clung to him, and he was not able to attack the mountain with all of Cate's verve.

The next week, it was speed-jumping. The week after that, bobsledding; that same weekend, riding with Cate in a sleek hovercar at speeds both dangerous and illegal, Aaron kept one finger crooked with feigned casualness around the hang-strap and ignored a silver rime of panic on his tongue. The next week, it was skiing again.

"So, when are you going to tell me about this new lady?" Mariclaire asked dryly one evening at dinner.

Aaron blinked. "I didn't think you'd noticed."

"Aaron, love, aside from the time you've been spending elsewhere, you come home with bruises, aches, and fingernail marks on your shoulders. What am I to think? Is she a wrestler?"

"A history student." Aaron grinned. "Only the fingernail tracks are her fault."

Mariclaire pushed her bangs out of her eyes and pursed her lips, amused and doubtful. "So where do the bruises come from?"

He knew without thinking that the skiing, the bobsledding, and the racing would upset Mariclaire far more than the fact of Cate would.

"So?" she prodded.

"We've gone skiing a couple of time. Bobsledding. That kind of thing."

Her face iced over, the mood of teasing gone completely. "*That kind of thing*? Since when have you gone in for that kind of thing? I thought you went through all that nonsense when you were seventy."

"It's not the same thing at all," Aaron said quickly. "Cate likes risk sports. I thought I'd try it out again, now that I'm beyond the age—"

"Right. Beyond the age. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes." He met her look squarely. "It's a kind of high. It makes me feel alive; you should try—"

"Oh, I'm quite alive enough, thanks. Now you need stupid risks to make you feel alive? Great, terrific. Aaron, I don't care about your lovers, but I do care if you get yourself k—" She stammered on the word, tried again. "I care if you get yourself killed trying to impress one of them."

"You don't understand."

"You're right. First there was the nonsense with psychotherapy, now this garbage. What's wrong with you? Why must everything be drama?

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Isn't it enough to be comfortable? Isn't that what age is supposed to do for you?"

"Make you feel comfortable, or freeze you till you're dead?"

"I don't feel dead. I just don't go through major crises over every goddamned daffodil I see. I don't need to risk my life — in which I have invested many years — in order to know I'm still drawing breath."

"There is a difference between keeping the machine going and having a reason to go on."

"And this bobsledding history student is giving you a reason to go on? Aaron, you've made it almost three hundred years without having to play high-speed downhill tag to find meaning to your life." She weighted the words with irony, the first positive sign of anger she had given. "And your history student, is she looking for a reason to keep the engine running, too?"

"It's different for her," he began. "She's not a lifer—"

Mariclaire stared at him, a muscle working near one eye. "A mortal. Aaron, you scare me. If you think the only thing that's going to shake you up is to rub shoulders with the romance of mortality — Jesus, Aaron." She shook her head. "It's a kind of sickness, you know that? And I really resent you making me feel like I'm some kind of monster because I don't want to wallow in pain and resentment and anger — all that stupidity."

"At least they're feelings! Hell, Mariclaire, you're afraid of the damned words!"

"They are ugly words. They're ugly feelings. There's enough of them in life without courting them! I've better things to do with my time."

"Like paint?" He thought of *Blue Hell* and the other unfinished canvases.

"Yeah, like paint. I don't need to blow my time on this heroic-passion garbage; life is too short."

Not for us, it isn't." Aaron pushed his uneaten dinner away with a hand he distantly realized was trembling.

For a moment, Mariclaire looked stricken. "Aaron, no. Look. Aaron —" She reached for his hand as he got up from his chair. "I just don't want you to be hurt."

He pulled away from her. "I don't want to be hurt, but at least it would be feeling something. Those are the risks you take." Aaron pulled a cape from the closet and left the apartment for the library.

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* * *

THE NEXT day was Tuesday. At the clinic he danced around the subject of his quarrel with Mariclaire, unwilling to repeat the whole thing for the therapist's benefit. At last, freed from the hour, Aaron walked to campus, drank tea by himself in the Student Center, and went over his seminar notes, watching pale characters blink quickly against the dark screen of his reader. A stocky man in a dark suit passed Aaron's table, recognized him, and stopped.

"Aaron?"

Blinking, Aaron looked up and realized that it was David Campoy, the man he had met with Nina Diaz at the ski lift weeks before. Seeing Campoy in regular dress, Aaron recognized him as a faculty member in one of the sciences. "Hi. Join me?"

Campoy looked around uneasily. "I have a class in a few minutes. But I thought you should know — you're a friend of Nina's, right?"

"Yes." Aaron was instantly on edge; there was a tone to Campoy's voice that he recognized, did not understand but recognized. "Yes," he said again, prompting Campoy.

"Then you should know. Nina died yesterday."

A moment of electric stillness while the words threaded themselves through Aaron's mind. Then the shock hit; he was dazzled, bewildered by pain. "Nina can't — she's a lifer."

Campoy said dryly, "Skiing. She went into a tree at sixty K per hour. The Radin Treatment's not much good against trees." His voice was like paper, crisp and lifeless. "I wouldn't go down the hill with her; I was afraid."

"Dave —"

He pressed on, unhearing. "She's been getting crazier and crazier all the time, looking for bigger thrills. She stood at the crest of the hill and yelled at me." Campoy lowered his voice. "'Come on, Dave, who wants to live forever?'"

Aaron stared at the man in horror. "Look, Dave —"

"I just thought you should know." Campoy smiled, or tried to. The attempt did not reach the haunted cold of his eyes. "I've got a class waiting."

Aaron watched him go. After a long while, he rose and crept to the building where his seminar was held; when he looked through the window at Nina's classroom, he saw someone else in her place, speaking quietly.

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* * *

Cate was sorry to hear about Nina. "She was a friend?" But she was more interested in her thesis. "You did say you'd read the draft this week," she reminded him. "Or is that taking advantage of my relationship with the teacher?" She flirted at him through the warm curtain of her hair. They sat on an uncomfortably overstuffed futon that slouched toward the center, crushing them together.

"I'll read it." He was unable to tease back.

"Hey, Aaron?"

"I'm sorry. This thing. Nina's death, it has me upset."

Cate cupped one warm hand around the back of his neck, leaned into him so one breast pressed against his arm. Aaron shrugged his shoulders, leaned slightly away. Her breath followed him, grazing his ear, an irritating invitation. "Cate—," he began edgily.

"Right." She shook the hair from her eyes and stood up. "Well, maybe another day." She picked up his reader and jacket from the chair where he had dropped them, and handed them to him.

"Cate, I didn't mean—"

"I'm sorry, Aaron. I can't get worked up about your friend, and I feel like you expect me to. I didn't know her. My own life is too short to spend it wrapped up in someone else's grief. I'm sorry." The regret was genuine, but she was adamant. "Give me a call when you're feeling better."

She let him out of her apartment.

Two days later they went bobsledding. Aaron had to clench his teeth on the fear that walled up in him, while Cate shone golden, fear transmuted into something piercingly beautiful and exciting. Afterward they went back to her rooms at the habitat and made love, and Aaron yearned toward her golden glow, the energy and appetite she exuded.

Mariclaire said nothing about the welts on his shoulders or the bruises on his sides. When he was in the apartment, she always seemed to be reading or working; the air was always scented with linseed oil and solvent. The new painting took shape slowly, incomplete but compelling. As it grew, Aaron and Mariclaire were polite and careful with each other; neither referred to their quarrel.

The end of the term was nearing. Aaron was weighted down with theses, listening, reading, marking, evaluating arguments and documentation. Cate's thesis came in with the rest, and Aaron read it with the same

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excitement he had felt on looking at her notes and first draft. The arguments were crisp and original, the documentation excellent, the style entertaining, and the conclusions exciting. Aaron was smiling when he gave Cate's paper back to her.

"It should be published. It's excellent work, and it would give you a fine entrée into the field." They sat in the small, sparsely occupied plaza in front of the Student Center, drinking tea.

"Maybe." She seemed unimpressed.

"If you're still undecided, at least take my Nineteenth-Century Imperialism course. And maybe Wu's course in—"

"I'm thinking of moving," she said abruptly.

He ignored a pricking of dismay, pursued his argument. "O.K., so you take the course by relay; two-thirds of my students have never set foot on the campus. You could—"

"Look, I've had it with history for a while. It's just *done*, O.K.?"

There was something more in her face, the way her eyes slid away from his. The world shifted further out of balance.

"Are we talking about history?" he asked.

The blue-green eyes flickered. "Yes."

He was unable to leave it at that. "Is that all we're talking about?"

A long sigh. "No." Her eyes met his, distant, already withdrawn. "I'm sorry, Aaron. Look, it was never anything serious. I don't have time for anything serious. You knew—"

"Then why?" It was a force of effort, centuries of practice that kept his voice low and even.

"Why not?" She shook her head, and a faint burst of her scent was released. "You don't understand. I don't have a thousand years. I don't have five hundred years. I told you when we began: I wanted you."

"Before the Radin Treatment, when we were all mortals, people had time for something serious," he began.

"That was when we were *all* mortals," she echoed. "I don't have enough time to waste doing anything but what I want. Look, if you built up some kind of fantasy about me — I didn't ask you to." Her tone was aggrieved. She watched him, injured and sulky behind the curtain of honey-colored hair.

Aaron stood up. "O.K." He took his reader and shuffled disks together every which way, into the carrier. "O.K." Slung the reader from its strap,

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over his shoulder. Stood for a moment looking at Cate, waiting for a reprieve he knew would not come, one last time. Then he turned and left her.

Walking back to campus through the mass of university habitats, Aaron kept his mind studiously blank. When he felt prickling behind his eyes, a tightness in his chest, *I'm all right,* he insisted. *I am O.K.* And he was: it surprised him to feel so little. He had meant to return to his office, but, once back on campus, Aaron was unable to feel any enthusiasm for reading more theses. He took a roundabout path home through the older section of the campus, studying the buildings, avoiding the eyes of people he passed. *I'm all right.* Mariclaire was out of the apartment when he reached home. Aaron left his reader on his desk and dropped into a chair in the living room, exhausted. He was asleep before Mariclaire got home.

I'm O.K. The more often he said it in the next few days, the truer it was. *I am O.K.* He did not tell Mariclaire what had happened with Cate, but the tension between them seemed to diminish of itself. Everything was returning to the way it had been. *I'm all right.* He kept office hours, finished up his classes, held the last session of the seminar with Cate's seat empty across the table from him, and felt nothing. When he left the seminar building, he saw Cate, talking animatedly with one of the instructors from the literatures faculty. *I am fine. Halfway across the campus, he passed David Campoy sitting alone in the Student Center. Just fine.* He had almost reached his office, when he realized his face was wet; he was crying. Suddenly he hurt so much the pain almost doubled him over.

At the Howard Clinic, he had to strain to remember his psychiatrist's name while the clerk watched him with cool impatience. "Dr. Brizzi," he said at last.

"You don't have an appointment? I can't . . . no, wait, I'll page him." Aaron sat in the lounge, his face tight where the salt tears had crossed it.

"Mr. Tenniel?" Dr. Brizzi's narrow, sad-eyed face was impassive.

"Do you have any time—," Aaron began.

"Let's go into my office."

The hologram had been switched off. Aaron faced the doctor and a blank white wall as he clumsily tried to explain what had happened. As he spoke, he wept, and anger and rage and hurt tore at him physically until he was sick with them. Dr. Brizzi listened, nodded, urged him on in his confessions. And did not once ask how Aaron felt. Finally Aaron told him:

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"It hurts. Jesus, it hurts." He looked at Dr. Brizzi with bewilderment.

"You were in love, and she wasn't," Brizzi said quietly. Aaron winced. "Surely you knew the risks, after all these years."

"I'd forgotten," Aaron said.

When he went home that night, Mariclaire was cooking. A faint steam of onions and stock hung in the air. Mariclaire looked up from the cutting board, smiled, tossed her head to shake the hair from her eyes. "You look exhausted."

"I am exhausted." He wanted to tell her about Nina, Cate, everything, but the words would not come, and he was not sure she needed to know about any of it. Finally he said, "I think I've had my last session at the clinic for a while."

She thought about it for a moment. Then: "All better?"

"No worse then when I started." He managed to smile at her, cocked his head toward the covered easel. "How's the painting coming?"

"Coming. There's something about it . . . but I don't know yet. It needs more work."

She reached for a spoon. "Feel like eating in ten minutes?"

"Sounds good." Aaron looked at her, drinking in the plane of high cheekbones and square jaw, her long eyes and full mouth, her familiarity. "Sounds great."

Sometime in the night, Aaron rose from their bed. He felt weak but calm, as if a storm had gone through him and passed away, leaving a clean, empty shoreline. Mariclaire slept with her face buried in the pillow, arms over her head, surrendered to sleep. His feelings newly tender, it was easy to remember that he loved her, to feel that love as he looked at her. After a moment he left the bedroom.

In the kitchen he poured himself some juice and started to read the papers again. After a while curiosity began to tease him, drawing his attention away. He gave in, rose, and pulled the cloth from the new painting. He looked at it for a few minutes, carefully; then Aaron went to Mariclaire's storage area, rummaged through the canvases and boards there until he found the one he wanted. *Blue Hell.* He examined it, the structure of it, the long stretches of paint, the heavy mass in the upper corner, brilliant crimson shadows, the radii of blues and grays. Then, carefully, so that Mariclaire should not know that he had been there, he

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returned the canvas to its place and went back to look at the new painting.

It was all there, the structure, the same shapes and shadows, a story told with new words. Some things, he thought, must be stated and restated, discovered and rediscovered, each time imperfectly, each time closer to the truth.

Aaron stared at the painting for a while longer, then recovered it and went back to his work.

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ANGELS ALONE

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

FOR A FEW MINUTES AFTER crossing the terminator, the shuttle still shone against the sky. Behind it the bright line of sunset receded, and a moonlit world of sea and cloud curved below. Ahead, stars outlined a circle of blackness that was the spacecraft's destination. Only one end of the vast, cylindrical satellite was visible from the shuttle's approach angle. It made a round, empty patch on the sky, like a tunnel into nothing.

Monodrumco Prison: back on Earth they called it the Black Hole. From the shuttle, it looked like one, but that was not the reason for the name. The reason was the event horizon that surrounded it. Things that went into Monodrumco were gone forever.

In the shuttle observation bubble, a speaker cleared its throat. "All passengers return to your seats," it said. Aleph glanced at it. There was only one passenger, herself. She didn't know how the shuttle crew had guessed she was not entirely human, but they had. Throughout the flight

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they had tried to cover their feelings with impersonality, closely guarding their precious gift of individual being.

She knew why they did it, how vulnerable they were. But it was useless. Their pores betrayed their horror.

The misty panorama below produced no feeling in her at all. Aleph had come up to the observation bubble only to escape the thick soup of pheromones in the cockpit. During takeoff she had practically gagged on human tensions. Up here the air was slightly cleaner; her body was regaining equilibrium.

She put out her hand to touch the window. It was cold. Millimeters from her fingers was vacuum: clean, neutral, free of biology. Her mind and body felt transparent, uncontaminated. She watched a film condense on the windowpane around her fingers; when she took her hand away, the moonlight shone through the negative print on the glass. Just as it shone through her.

Outside, the dark face of Monodrumco had almost swallowed the stars. In her present state, Aleph was incapable of fear; the satellite prison ahead was only an abstraction, like the future. Like Aleph herself, it was all possibility, all potential, not limited by fixed shape or form.

"We are commencing docking maneuvers. Please return to your seat," the speaker said. It sounded more peremptory this time. Expressionless, Aleph turned to obey.

The metal cavern of the shuttle bay roared and hissed with the fading echoes of the engines as Aleph left the shuttle, dressed in a dark flight suit and boots. In a crowd she would have disappeared, utterly forgettable: it was hard to say if she was tall or short, heavy or lean, or even what sex she was. She was blank as a department-store mannequin.

A worker in a black uniform led her to an elevator, instructing her to stand on the right-hand side and hold the handrail, as she would be taking on the spin of the drum. The doors sliced off the noise, and they plunged outward from the cylinder's core, into the heart of the prison.

When the doors opened again, the pseudogravity was near normal. Aleph stepped out, and the smell of Monodrumco met her: the smell of fear. She noted it without bias, as neutral information. The smell was not strong enough to affect her.

Her guide set off down the gray corridor. There was no sign of life, just

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empty hallways paved in a flexible material that absorbed all footsteps, all heartbeats. At last they turned into a long, tunnellike corridor with a single unmarked door at the end. When they reached the door, Aleph's guide plugged a pocket intercom into a wall receptacle. "Dr. Johanson, the anthroform is here," she said. Presently there was a buzz and a click as the door unbolted. Aleph stepped through alone.

The room was absolutely black but for two spotlights: one on a steel-gray desk, the other on a chair facing it. Behind the desk a middle-aged woman sat smoking a cigarette. Her wiry gray hair was drawn so tightly back from her face that her skin seemed taut. She watched the visitor from marble-hard eyes, taking three sucks on her cigarette before she spoke.

"They told me you were the best," she said.

Aleph did not answer.

"Come here. Turn around," Dr. Johanson said. Her eyes tracked Aleph as she stepped into the light and turned around.

"All right. Sit down," Johanson said. Aleph obeyed. The chair was low, the spotlight hot on her face. The setting would have bothered a human.

"So what's your name?" Johanson said.

"We do not have names," Aleph answered. Her voice was clear and toneless. "We have designations. Mine is Aleph-34. You can call me Aleph."

"I can, can I?" Johanson's mouth twitched as if at something ludicrous. "All right, Aleph. I don't usually order my employees out of catalogs, you know. You seem to be the body type I wanted. Basic Caucasio-Mediterranean. Your hair was supposed to be dark, though."

"The hair will change. You wanted me in a null state."

It had been a strange request: a protean anthroform in an unindividuated state. Aleph's agency had searched hard to find a protean willing to live in filtered isolation for the weeks necessary to distill away all traces of individuality. Aleph had finally accepted the contract, not so much for the money as to see if she *could* withdraw from the strong drug of human personality that had been in her system for so many years.

"You're a last resort, you know," Johanson said. "We have tried everything else." She leaned back in her chair, a trail of smoke rising from the cigarette in her fingers. "Looking at you, it's hard to believe this will work. You're not like her at all. Too ordinary. Too inconspicuous."

Clients were always skeptical at first, sometimes ashamed and defen-

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sive. Aleph had dealt with it a hundred times. "Have you ever seen a protean anthroform work?" she asked.

Johanson gave a snort of laughter. "*Seen* you? My father worked in the lab where you were invented. I learned your DNA sequence instead of nursery rhymes."

"Then you're familiar with more primitive models. There have been many advances. In my generation, it takes only a few minutes of exposure to another human to start the assimilation process. In a week or two of prolonged contact, we can be indistinguishable from our subjects. We have fooled our clients' families. We have fooled assassins, law enforcers, and celebrity fans. I can promise, whoever you want duplicated, I can do it."

"Two weeks, you say?" Johanson eyed her.

"That depends on how much time I can spend with the subject, and how close."

"We'll have to be subtle. It's important that she not know what you are."

"I am used to that."

For an instant, anger jerked at Johanson's face. "Yes. But Leah Lazarus has a kind of cunning no one is used to."

The name came out with such venom that Aleph could feel her own blood turn bitter. She did not want to respond to Dr. Johanson; she wanted to hold onto her detachment. But the room was as thick with the woman's aggression and distrust as it was with her cigarette smoke. Unwillingly, Aleph could feel herself begin to change.

"Is the subject a prisoner?" Aleph asked. She had done criminals before. Among proteans, it was not considered a pleasant job; but Monodrumco was paying well.

Johanson said nothing for a moment. "We need to discuss security," she said. "Your contract states that you will be free to return to Earth. We have to be sure of your discretion."

"We have a professional code," Aleph said. "Confidentiality is guaranteed."

"Guarantees can be broken."

"I would never work again if I revealed my clients' secrets. If you want me to duplicate someone, you are going to have to trust me." She paused, facing Johanson with a truculent look. "I assume that's why you've brought

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me here. Though if you want me to do the job, you'd damn well better tell me what it is."

In the silence a slow smile grew on Johanson's face. "So there *is* a personality in you, after all. For a while there, I thought I was talking to a robot."

"I'm as flesh and blood as you are. The flesh and blood just change."

"All right. I believe you." Johanson had relaxed a little, as if she knew where she stood now. "The person I want duplicated has some information that should be mine. She's not a prisoner, not in the ordinary sense. You see, I am head of Monodrumco's scientific research department. Leah Lazarus is one of my staff members."

There was rumors about the science that went on at Monodrumco, far above the restrictions of earthly governments and public opinions. Only two things were known for sure: the stream of lucrative patents it produced, and the staggering salaries offered by the vigilant Monodrumco headhunters. But there was a price: once hired, scientists did not return to tell the tale of what went on in the secret orbiting labs.

"What sort of information?" Aleph asked. "We're not telepaths, you know. I can duplicate a person's pattern of thinking, but not knowledge."

Johanson exhaled a long stream of smoke in Aleph's direction. "I know that. What I have in mind is a kind of interrogation. There were some important research results. Lazarus decided to break her contract and withhold them from the company. She can't get away with that. She knew it, but wanted to spite us all."

The rage in Johanson's voice surged through Aleph's brain. Her fingers moved agains the chair arm, wanting to toy with something. The room was no longer gray, but livid with contagious emotion.

"We have tried everything to make her cooperate," Johanson went on. "She's loyal to no one. No one but herself."

"But I—" Aleph felt Johanson's triumph at her own cunning — "I can *be* herself."

"It has been known to work in the past."

"It does." Aleph leaned forward conspiratorially. "People trust others like themselves. Humans mimic each other all the time. They do it to win over their neighbors by mirroring them. But we proteans do it better, at a subliminal level. For we really *are* like our subjects, right down to the hormones on our skin."

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Johanson was smiling, caught up in the anticipation of success. "So you think it will work?"

"It may. If done subtly. It has worked with you."

The smile faded from Johanson's face. Her cigarette hung in midair, halfway to her mouth. Abruptly she turned and jabbed a code into a sunken keyboard on her desk. A drawer sprung open. She took out a silver disk. She paused to take a long pull at her cigarette, then stubbed it out with a vicious twist in the ashtray. She held out the disk.

"This has background information and instructions. Study it. You'll have to be cautious. If Lazarus guesses what you are, she'll never tell you anything." She pressed another code, and the door buzzed as the lock shot back. Aleph realized she had been dismissed. She rose.

"One more thing," Johanson said. "A warning. Watch out for Lazarus. She's always in control, though you'll think otherwise. Don't let her fool you."

"I will do my best," Aleph said.

Outside, the uniformed guard was waiting. As they walked down the monotonous halls, Aleph could feel Johanson's personality draining away from inside her. It left an acid aftertaste, like a partly undigested meal. She was glad she could walk away from it; the thought of being trapped inside her skin with all that shrewdness and suspicion, unable to break free, was nauseating.

The room the guard showed her to was clean and clinical as the halls. There was nothing but a built-in bed, a desk with a terminal, and a sanitary alcove. Her bag was waiting, and beside it lay a plastic-wrapped meal. Aleph stood absorbing solitude, waiting for the cool neutrality of selflessness to return.

There was a mirror above the desk. She went to look at her face. Ordinary, Johanson had said. Inconspicuous. It was, of course. That was how she had been designed. She put her fingers on the image, and felt again the sensation of vacuum against her hand.

The staff cafeteria was a wasteland of spotless Formica. The tables were arranged in little islands separated by shoulder-high partitions, giving the illusion of privacy but not the reality. Johanson had foreseen that it would be a good place for Aleph to get near her quarry without being noticed, and so had arranged for them both to be there. As Aleph entered,

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she scanned the room and spotted her target instantly. She turned to pick up a tray.

No one glanced at her. That was not remarkable; in this form she blended into crowds as if faceless. But she suspected that no one noticed anyone else here. The tables were sparsely occupied, Formica faces eating from plastic dishes. Aleph chose a table where she could watch her subject through a crack in the partition. She ate slowly, studying what she was hired to become.

Leah Lazarus was dressed in a dark, one-piece uniform that emphasized her tall, lean build. She sat sideways in her chair, absorbed in a book, her long legs stretched out. Once she moved, and Aleph glimpsed the title: Elizabethan poetry.

She had a strong-featured face: deep eyes under dark brows; a long, Semitic nose; thick, curly hair cropped close except in front, where it fell forward into her eyes. At the moment her expression was fiercely focused.

Aleph had studied Johanson's videodisk for an hour, and still knew little more than her immediate instructions. She was not to let Lazarus notice her for the first few days, but to absorb as much as she could at long range. By the time she actually met Lazarus, the assimilation would already have begun. Then she could set about winning the subject's trust.

The lack of information had made her wonder whether Johanson was concealing something distasteful about the job. The sight of Lazarus put that theory to rest; she was clearly not psychotic or diseased. There was even something about her that piqued Aleph's professional interest. She watched closely, alert to the occasional thread of scent that came her way when the subject moved, trying to analyse its components. Yes, this would be a challenge.

All the proteans she knew had a mental file of personality recipes — two teaspoons of cautiousness, half a cup of cruelty, a dash of guilt, and so on. Aleph could instantly sense an innovative combination of traits. But this one defied pigeonholes.

Across the room there was a crash as someone dropped a tray of dishes. Everywhere faces turned to look. When Aleph turned back, Lazarus was gone.

Aleph suppressed the urge to stand up and look for her. She felt disoriented; she had barely glanced away. She turned back to her meal.

An arm reached across her shoulder, holding a cafeteria knife. "Watch

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closely," said a voice. The knife flipped into the air, turned a flashing somersault, and then disappeared.

Before Aleph could blink, Leah Lazarus was sitting in the seat opposite her. The knife was lying on the table between them. Lazarus held up a hand and pressed the knife's point against her palm. With a slight scraping sound, it went through, the point protruding from the back of her hand. She smiled and pulled it out, leaving not a mark.

"You think it's a trick knife, don't you?" Lazarus said. "Here." She held it out. Aleph took it; it was only a new stainless-steel table knife. She handed it back. Lazarus flipped it over again and made it disappear. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "They'll come along pretty soon to take it away. They don't let me have sharp objects anymore. Afraid I'll dig my way out through the walls, I suppose." She laughed.

At such close range, her personality was a dazzling kaleidoscope. Manic energy. Recklessness. A trace of paranoia, perhaps.

Aleph struggled to think of something cautiously human to say. "You mean we're being watched?"

"Of course. They hide the cameras in the lighting fixtures." Lazarus pointed up at a recessed light trained on their table. Yes, thought Aleph, definitely paranoia.

"So. Did Johanson send you?" Lazarus asked. Her black eyes were fixed on Aleph's face. There was curiosity. Intelligence. Aleph realized she had to get away before the woman guessed. She didn't want to.

"What do you mean, send me? Oh, you saw me watching you."

"I see many things," Lazarus said in the voice of a carnival fortune-teller. "I'd been wondering why she let me come here, after keeping me locked up for a month. One of her subtle management practices, you know. What's your name?"

Johanson's videodisk had given Aleph a false persona to use. She tried to take her eyes off Lazarus' face long enough to think of it, then realized she had already paused too long. "You can call me Aleph," she said.

Lazarus' eyebrows shot up at an angle, as if she had lighted upon some crucial clue. "The first of the sephiroth of the ancient Cabalists, one of the tenfold emanations of God. Aleph, the primal letter. The Cabalists believed there was a Light Aleph, the force of Creation, and a Dark Aleph, the primal void. I wonder which you are."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

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"Never mind." Lazarus was studying her with a look of entrapped fascination. "You're a protean anthroform, aren't you?"

Aleph felt as if she had been stripped naked. All her life she had passed for human; there was no way Lazarus could have known. Somehow Aleph had bungled, given herself away. "What makes you think so?" she asked, her voice low.

"You have no fingerprints. You handled the knife, but there were no fingerprints when you gave it back."

"Is that why you gave it to me?"

"Yes." Lazarus hesitated. Aleph watched for the disgust that always came to humans when they knew; but it was not there. "Can I see? Your hands, I mean." She seemed almost shy.

Aleph held out her hand, and Lazarus took it carefully, studying the printless fingers. "What would happen if I pressed my fingers on yours?" she asked.

"Your own print would grow there."

"How fast?"

"A few hours."

Gently, Lazarus pressed her thumb against Aleph's, then one by one each fingertip. The breath caught in Aleph's throat, and she closed her eyes, for an intoxicating sense of being was rushing into her. Her skin tingled with its intensity.

When she was able to look up again, Lazarus was studying her carefully, "I'm sorry," she said. "Did I do that to you?"

"Yes." Aleph tried to make her aching throat work normally. "Don't be sorry."

"What did it feel like?"

It had felt like nothing Aleph had experienced before. "Like a balloon being filled with helium. Like drinking water when you're parched. No, that's all wrong. Nothing feels quite like it."

"What caused it?"

Aleph gave a slight laugh. This was the strangest conversation she had ever had with a client. Johanson was wrong. Lazarus was not hostile; she suspected nothing. This was going to be easy. Her heart was beating light and fast. "Amino acids," she said. "Every human is surrounded by a cloud of pheromones. Their skin and breath are a garden of enzymes. I am designed to respond to them. But it doesn't feel like chemicals."

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"Neither do love or inspiration," Lazarus said softly; "but they are all chemicals, too." She looked down and ran a light finger across Aleph's palm. Aleph shivered. "Do you become exactly like another person?"

It made no difference anymore; she might as well know everything. "I can become close enough to fool most tests. I would become genetically identical only if their DNA entered my body. But then the change would be permanent."

Lazarus looked up. "You don't want that?"

"No."

"No, of course you wouldn't. You are unique as you are. You can experience anything."

What was it in her voice? Longing. Envy, almost. But that was ridiculous.

A neckless, crew-cut guard had appeared at the door. Lazarus spun around in her seat and held one leg out horizontal to the floor. She whipped out the knife and balanced it dexterously upright on the toe of her boot. The knife was still balanced when the guard scuffed to a halt next to them. As he reached out to snatch it, it fell to the floor, and he had to bend down to retrieve it.

"Please, officer, I didn't mean no harm," Lazarus sniveled.

"Next time I'll ram this up your ass," he said.

Lazarus clicked her tongue. "Temper, temper."

The man stepped nearer, all stubble and sweat. "Jew bitch," he said.

Lazarus' gaze on him was cold and level. They stared each other down for a few seconds, then the guard turned away, his thick hand clutching the knife hard.

"That cocksucker," Lazarus said in a venomous whisper. "When I get out of here, I'll roast his nuts on a grill." Her eyes flashed in Aleph's direction. "And I *am* getting out of here. Johanson can't stop me. No one can."

Aleph shook her head. The battling hormones around her had been painting great smears across her mind. "I don't know how you got into this trouble," she said, "but why don't you give Johanson what she wants?"

Lazarus stared at her in disbelief. "What she wants? Do you know what that is?"

"Some research results. . . ."

Lazarus cut her off with a harsh laugh. "I'll tell you what she wants.

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My freedom. She wants to own me, to have me as her possession forever. The formulas are my only way out of here. I've told her she can have them as soon as I'm back on Earth. But she can't have them and me, too. She has to choose, or she'll end up with neither."

A tremor of doubt passed through Aleph's mind. Lazarus believed absolutely in what she was saying.

"Johanson can't abide anything that exists independent of her," Lazarus said. "She has to control things. Here she can do it. She can own everything and everyone but me. Only I am free. That's why she hates me." She paused, then reached across the table for Aleph's hand, pressing it hard between hers. "Are you her tool? Does she own you?"

Aleph's skin prickled with borrowed egotism. "No one owns me. There is no me to own."

"What do you mean?"

"I came here in a null state. I am chemically neutral. I have no self."

Lazarus' eyes narrowed. "That's impossible. The sense of self is essential to awareness."

"All right," Aleph said. "Then say I have no ego. You said you were the only free one here, but you were wrong. You may be free from locks and cells; you may even be free from Johanson. But you are still a prisoner of your own personality. Only I am truly free."

Lazarus stared at her, transfixed. She looked as if a new awareness had impaled her. "Aleph —," she started.

Two guards were approaching their table. Lazarus saw them, and whispered urgently, "I have to see you again. Please. Come here tomorrow. Don't let me down."

As the guard came up, Lazarus stood to meet them, once more mocking, self-assured. For an instant she turned back to Aleph, her eyebrows slyly bent. She held out her hand. As Aleph shook it, she glimpsed a second cafeteria knife protruding from Lazarus' sleeve. Lazarus winked at her, and then was gone.

Aleph's own silent guide/guard was waiting at the doorway. It crossed her mind that she, too, was being treated more as a prisoner than an employee. She quickly dismissed the thought, a remnant of the paranoia that had entered her body at Lazarus' touch.

Which version of events was she to believe? Lazarus' mythic struggle, freedom against despotism? Or the slightly sordid personnel problem

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Johanson had portrayed? Perhaps, within the boundaries of each woman's individuality, each story was true.

She got up to leave, but changed her mind and sat down in the place where Lazarus had been. The seat was still warm. She tried to put herself in Lazarus' mind. A memory of intense vitality rushed like liquor to her head.

She forced herself to stop. She was only tantalizing herself. Her role in this drama was over; she had been detected, and was of no use to Johanson now. She would probably be sent back on the next shuttle to Earth.

As she was rising to leave, she saw Lazarus had left her book of poetry on the seat. She picked it up, and felt her fingers tingle with the spice of hand oils on it. She pressed it between her hands, then fanned the pages; they breathed on her, cool with the scent of many readings.

And suddenly there was no question. She had to convince Johanson to let her continue. Somehow she had to find a way to possess Lazarus, to drink her in, to feel that flesh become her own. She had never wanted anything so much.

As she followed the guard docilely to her room, she could feel a seed crystal of self growing in the supercooled liquid of her being. Already the air, the light, seemed different; her surroundings had lost neutrality. She was beginning to reflect, to measure the world against herself and give it value. Soon she would be human.

WHEN ALEPH entered Johanson's office early the next day, the administrator's chair was turned with its high back to the door; a slow tendril of smoke rose from it into the yellow spotlight. The opposite wall was lit with a tape of Aleph and Lazarus sitting at the cafeteria table. It was taken from above — the light fixture, Aleph realized. She watched as Lazarus reached out and took her hand, then saw her face go taut with inrushing life. There was a click, and the scene showed again, this time slower, drawing out the sensuality. When it began to run a third time, Aleph cleared her throat.

The wall went black, and Johanson's chair pivoted around. She was holding the remote control in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Aleph stood defiantly casual, arms crossed and weight on one leg. She had not thought it out clearly; she just intuited that she was twice as likely to be fired if she acted like a failure.

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Johanson was studying her closely. "I'll be damned," she said at last. "You already look a little like her."

"That's my job," Aleph said.

"Mannerisms more than looks," Johanson mused. "Sit down." Aleph came forward and spun the chair around, then sank down sideways in it, her long legs stretched out.

"Well, you certainly botched your assignment," Johanson's voice grated. "It took her two minutes to see through you."

"I doubt there's much she doesn't see through."

"You're useless to me now, you know."

"I don't think so. She asked me to come back."

"Yes, I saw that part. I think she meant it for my ears. She knew I was listening, of course."

Aleph's gaze was steady and cool. "I think you're wrong," she said. "I think she meant it for my ears."

Johanson drew closer to her desk. The skin around her eyes was pale and puffy, but the eyes themselves looked ravenous. Aleph felt a breath of her turmoil, but could ignore it; the imprint of Lazarus' personality was still strong inside her.

"Why did you react when she touched you?" Johanson said.

Aleph allowed a slow, tantalizing smile to grow on her face. "For me," she said, "a touch is a way into a client's being. I can feel their essence."

"Yes? Tell me what it was like."

"It was like having her inside me." For a moment, Aleph let the memory wash through her in all its intimacy. She was only half-surrendering to Johanson's suggestions; the other half was deliberately trailing bait before the older woman. She could smell the hunger on her breath.

"You found it pleasant?" Johanson asked softly.

Aleph let her head fall against the chair back, laughing softly.

"Do you want it again?"

Suddenly the game felt sour. Aleph *did* want it again. And Johanson could deny it to her.

"I think I could still get her to trust me," Aleph said. "She was intrigued. Perhaps it's the thought of seeing a duplicate of herself."

Johanson was resting her chin on the heel of her hand, the cigarette by her ear building ash. "Yes," she said. "I can believe that. She's the ultimate narcissist. She's never really believed in the existence of anyone but

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"We can none of us return to Earth. . . . Not after having been here."

herself." She tapped the ash into a tray. "She was manipulating you, you know. All that show of interest in you was just another magic trick. Everything she does is calculated. She wants something from you."

"Well, I want something from her," Aleph said coolly. "Maybe we can work out a deal."

"Maybe. It's worth a try."

Aleph felt a surge of triumph, but kept her face neutral. She didn't want Lazarus' emotions used against her. She was glad Johanson couldn't detect how far under their influence she was.

"But if I give you this chance, take this warning as well," Johanson said. "Don't give her anything until you have what you want. Gratitude and loyalty are foreign words to her. I learned that the hard way. She owes me everything. *Everything.* And look what I get."

Aleph wondered what had happened between them. "Why did she come here?" she asked.

"She had no choice."

"You don't mean she was a prisoner?"

Johanson's face grew rigid. "You think I emply criminals on my scientific staff?"

"No. I suppose not."

"All the same, she wouldn't be free if it weren't for me."

"But she's not free!"

"She's as free as any of us here," Johanson said savagely. "We can none of us return to Earth, you know. Not after having been here. Even if the Company allowed it, the stigma would follow us everywhere. But Lazarus won't admit that. She wants to have it all: all the advantages the Company can give her, none of the limitations. Not like the rest of us human beings."

"Perhaps if you didn't confine her—"

"You call that confinement?" Johanson demanded. "Do you want to see real confinement? Do you want to see where the prisoners are kept?"

"I thought—"

"You thought the prisoners lived like the rest of us. Well, let me teach

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you something about freedom." She pushed back her chair and tapped out a code on her keyboard. A drawer opened, and she took out a hand-held video monitor. "Here, take this," she said.

Aleph took it gingerly, as it was covered with the bitter secretions of Johanson's hands.

"Go down the hall to the elevator," Johanson ordered. "I'll direct you from there." She watched as Aleph stood slowly. "Go on!" she shouted. Aleph went.

The monitor sputtered to life in her hand when the elevator arrived. Johanson's face appeared on the tiny screen. "Get on. Go up to nineteen." Aleph obeyed. She turned the screen away as if it could see her.

When the elevator stopped, Aleph's feet left the ground, and she had to catch hold of the rail to come back down. The gravity was barely strong enough to walk. When she stepped out, the hallway was the same monotony of gray as before. Ahead a uniformed guard sat at a workstation surrounded by video monitors. On seeing Aleph, he tensed, staring. As she approached, he rose, frowning suspiciously.

"Give him the monitor," Johanson's voice ordered.

The man plugged an earphone into it and listened to some silent instructions from Johanson. At the end he nodded and handed the monitor back. He took out a key-card and led her down the hall. Pairs of numbered doors faced each other at intervals down the long corridor. He stopped at the second pair and inserted his card.. "Keep going till you get to the other door," he said in an official voice. Then, as Aleph passed him, he muttered in her ear, "Giving you a preview, eh, Lazarus?"

A moment later the door was closed behind her. Aleph stood for a second, touching her face, intrigued that she had changed enough to fool someone. It rarely happened so quickly.

Ahead of her the narrow corridor curved upward; she realized that it ran riblike around the drum. On either side the way was lined with glass-fronted cabinets, stacked six-high to the ceiling. The acrid smell of fear she had noticed on first entering the prison was stronger here.

"Go ahead," Johanson's voice said from her hand. Aleph glanced up toward the lights, Johanson's eyes. She started forward.

When she came abreast of the first set of cabinets, she realized she was in a morgue. Bodies lay shelved behind the sealed glass, all dressed in uniform gray smocks. They looked perfectly preserved. Aleph passed by

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the first few rows. Most were men, all races and shapes. Puzzled, she stopped to study one whose eyes were still open. His head turned to look at her.

She jerked back so hard that her feet left the floor and she caromed into the cabinets on the other side. The dead man's glassy eyes seemed to follow her.

Johanson was laughing, a dry, crackling sound. "Don't worry," she said, "he can't see you. It's one-way glass."

"They're alive," Aleph said.

"Yes. Prisoners usually are."

"This is how they are kept?"

"Yes. It saves marvelously on storage space. We keep them healthy, in case we ever have to produce them. They're fed intravenously and monitored all the time. The low gravity keeps the blood from pooling; they never get bedsores. Of course, the muscles atrophy, and after a few years, the bones decalcify. We're working on ways to prevent it."

Aleph's voice sounded raspy. "They're drugged, aren't they?"

"Not at all. Too expensive."

"How long are they kept like this?"

"We still have some from when the prison opened nineteen years ago. They've never been out of their cases."

Aleph closed her eyes. Something inside her, something from Lazarus, was reacting violently. The narrow walls seemed to be closing in, trapping her. Her heart raced, panicky. She moved on to convince her body she was still free.

She saw now that the prisoners' arms and legs were strapped down to prevent movement — not that they could have moved far in the confines of their coffins. She came to some who showed more life. One was turning his head back and forth like an endless, purposeless pendulum. Another seemed to be talking, his face rigid and white. She paused by one who was trying to move, struggling against his straps. As she watched, his bearded face turned toward her and he screamed. Not a sound passed through the thick glass.

"A new one," Johanson said. "He's only been in there a week."

"Who are they?" Aleph asked faintly. "What have they done?"

"We don't ask," Johanson said. "They're sent here by governments, courts, whoever can afford the fees. We take them on contract. It's not our

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business what they've done. We just provide a service."

"Burial alive," Aleph said.

"If you want to get moralistic."

Aleph hurried on, wanting to get to the end of the corridor. On either side the prisoners crowded, so close they could have touched her, each one living out an individual nightmare in a box. She tried not to look, but their agony ate at her skin. She clamped her jaw to keep her face from showing it.

"Don't you want to see the ones Lazarus experimented on?" Johanson's voice came mockingly from the monitor in her hand. Aleph forced herself to slow down.

"You experiment on them as well?" she asked.

"Only the ones whose sponsors have given permission, or defaulted on their contracts," Johanson said. "We have tested some great discoveries here, done research that is a benefit to humanity."

The face of the prisoner next to Aleph was twitching with an uncontrollable tic.

"Take these prisoners, for example," Johanson said. "They have received what men for centuries have dreamed of: the gift of Lazarus' serum."

"What does it do?"

"Lazarus was working on the mechanisms of the aging process. She found a combination of proteins that halted the breakdown of cells in the laboratory. These were the first human tests. So far, it seems to have slowed the biological clock to a crawl. These men could live for centuries."

Aleph could feel horror rising up from the pit of her stomach. "You gave them eternal life? To spend like this?"

"Lazarus did."

Aleph plunged forward, seeing nothing, her hands clutched to her chest lest they touch what lay on either side. A door loomed ahead of her. She lunged for it, but recoiled when it lit up with a huge projected image of Johanson's face.

"I want you to give a message to Lazarus from me," the image said. It was as tall from chin to forehead as Aleph herself. The cracks in its lips were the size of her fingers. "It suits my sense of justice that she should join her guinea pigs in here. What she gave them, I'll give her: eternal life in a coffin. No more movement, no more sight, no more anything. Just life."

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The image was gone. Aleph threw her shoulder against the door, and it opened into the corridor. She covered the distance to the elevators in a few long strides. In the seconds before the elevator door opened, she saw a waste-recovery chute and slung the video monitor into it.

She didn't slow when she reached her own room. In one motion she stripped her uniform off and went into the shower. There she soaped every inch of her body to get off the stench of the prisoners. When she came out, she took a washcloth to pick up the uniform, and threw it into the laundry chute. She then washed the place on the floor where it had lain, and threw away the cloth.

She stood in front of the mirror naked, drying her hair. The turmoil in her mind had coalesced into a deep anger. "I ought to walk out of here," she said aloud. "I ought to have no part in this. I can break my contract, you know. I can take the next shuttle to Earth."

The mirror stared back at her. Already her hair seemed thicker and darker. The pseudobone of her face ached where it was softening and remolding itself to build up the bridge of her nose, the thrust of her eyebrows, the stubborn jut of chin. But more striking than the face was her manner. She stood like Lazarus now, feet apart, head up, unapologetic. She looked up at the light fixture, then turned to show herself to it. "Satisfied?" she asked it.

She threw the towel across the room, then stood on her hands and walked upside down to the door, then back to the bed, where she sat. She had never expected to be so grateful for the simple movement of muscle.

"Did you really do it?" she asked the Lazarus in the mirror; it only looked back with charcoal eyes. She could see the arrogance in its face, the semi-absorption that could stoop to torture and not care. She felt a wave of rage: rage at whatever invisible, immoral brain had invented this prison; but most of all rage at Lazarus for having fooled her, and herself for having been fooled.

An hour ago she had wanted this shape, this personality, more than she had thought herself capable of wanting anything. She looked away from it. The book of poety lay beside the bed, open to a sonnet. Aleph glimpsed the line:

For I, except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

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She made a movement to get up, to pack her bag and return to the vacuum. But she stopped, washed back by a current of hunger. Her instincts still ached with an insupportable need to *be*, to have full personhood, to have *this* personhood. She was helpless in that undertow. She watched in the mirror as a smile grew on her face, ironic and tantalizing, Lazarus' smile. Lazarus, her jailer.

When Aleph entered the cafeteria the next day, Lazarus was pacing, dark and tense, by the opposite door. She was so absorbed she did not notice Aleph crossing the room. When she finally looked up, her ominous glower disappeared in an instant. She came forward, took one of Aleph's hands to study the fingerprints, then walked around her, looking her over. "It's a miracle," she said.

"The change has only just started."

"Yes, I can see. But it's still remarkable." She put her arm around Aleph's shoulder and turned to the door. "I'm free to come and go today," she said quietly in Aleph's ear. "They're just following to see what I do. Come to my room."

As they were about to leave, the door bounded open, and a young man in a white uniform came through. He had a thin, pale face, a scanty beard, and hair down to his shoulders. When he nearly collided with Lazarus, he flushed. Aleph glimpsed a small object passing from his hand to hers. It was gone before she was sure it was there.

"Lazarus!" he said nervously. "Are you free now? What's happened?"

"They've let out my leash," she said.

The young man glanced around to see if any guards were near, then said in a low tone, "Listen, I've heard that they've hired —" He stopped, eyes on Aleph, realizing what she was. A look of repulsion crossed his face.

"My friend Aleph," Lazarus said, her arm still tight around Aleph's shoulders.

The man took an involuntary step backward. "I'd better go," he muttered. But before he could turn away, Lazarus caught his arm, pulled him toward her, and kissed him on the cheek. She let her hand linger for a moment afterward, as if reluctant to pull away. His face went rigid, but his eyes on her were full of unguarded longing. She turned and steered Aleph out the door.

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The instant they were outside, she set off fast down the hall, absorbed in her own thoughts. Somehow Aleph knew she had forgotten all about the man.

"I have to talk to you," Aleph said.

"Soon," Lazarus answered.

Lazarus' room lay on a silent, dead-end corridor as monotonous as all the others in the steel honeycomb. When they reached her door, she whispered, "Stand under the light and don't look at me. I'll tell you when it's safe."

When they entered, Lazarus darted to the other side of the room and wrestled the chest of drawers away from the wall. She climbed on top of it and, producing a cafeteria knife, pried up a ceiling panel next to the lighting fixture. She took a small device from her pocket and, using the knife to loosen some screws, began to wire it into something in the space above the drop ceiling.

Aleph stood with the light trained on her, looking around the room to avoid watching what Lazarus was doing. Once the room had been identical to her own. Now the tile floor was covered by an intricate Persian throw rug. On the book-heaped writing table stood an eighteenth-century orrery, its gleaming brass arms supporting the six planets in a spidery embrace. Beside it a rosewood recorder lay on a leather-bound book open to a pre-Copernican diagram of the celestial hierarchies. The dresser top was a forest of bottles, each marked with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet corresponding to an obscure chart tacked to the wall above them. Hanging above the rumpled bed was an original print of Dürer's *Melancholia*, her dark, intense face gazing troubled into the featureless wall.

Lazarus fitted the ceiling panel back into place and jumped down. "That should confuse the führer for a while," she said. "Long enough for us to speak alone." She turned, and Aleph felt like a searchlight had been trained on her. Lazarus looked as if she were memorizing each pore, each hair. Fascinated, she came closer and put out a hand to touch Aleph's face; Aleph stepped back.

"Not yet," she said. "I need to know something." She crossed her arms, eyeing Lazarus darkly. "Johanson showed me the prisoners yesterday. The ones you experimented on."

Lazarus' look did not flicker. "Yes?"

"For God's sake, don't you feel any guilt?"

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"They're criminals. I let them serve a good purpose for the first time in their lives."

"They're suffering. Don't you feel anything for them?"

Lazarus was studying her closely, puzzled. "Why is it you do? You are supposed to be me, just like me."

"Our memories, our experiences are not the same. Damn it, I have *been* criminals like that."

A look of disgust crossed Lazarus' face. "Don't say that! I don't want to hear that you have ever been anyone else. I want to think you have only been me."

In the silence a look of horrified curiosity took over her face. "How many people have you been?"

Aleph looked down. "I don't know. It doesn't matter now."

Lazarus had drawn close again, as if she could not keep away. Aleph had intended to vent her outrage; but being so close woke a sharp animal hunger in her. As yet she had barely tasted Lazarus; she wanted to gorge like a glutton. Her anger seemed thin and empty.

"Ah, if only I could be like you," Lazarus whispered. She put her fingers lightly on Aleph's cheek, and this time, Aleph did not draw away.

"What do you mean? You *will* be like me."

"No, I mean free to be anyone. It can't work the other way, can it? A human become a protean?"

"No. You don't know what you're saying. You don't really want it."

"But I *do*," Lazarus said. "We all do, secretly. In our hearts."

Aleph wondered if it were true. It was a new feeling to be envied by a human.

"Does that strike you as immoral?" Lazarus asked.

Aleph shook her head. "I don't know what morality is."

"Of course not. No more than a cloud or a number does. You are so free."

"No," Aleph said. "I lied to you. I'm not free. I can't ever be free, as long as humans exist. Whatever they feel, I must feel. Whatever they are, I must be. I have no ideas, no emotions, of my own. I am no better than all of them. I *am* all of them. All humanity, with their stinking prejudices and guilts." She looked up. "At least you are not at their mercy."

"Oh yes?" There was a sad, wise smile on Lazarus' face. She gestured around the room. Aleph remembered it was a prison cell.

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She caught Lazarus' hand in her own. She felt a kinship with her, prisoners as they both were. "Listen, I have to warn you. Johanson gave me that tour for a reason. She wanted me to see what was in store for you. She's going to put you up there, in one of those boxes. Soon, if I fail. She wants to do it now."

An ordinary person would not have thought Lazarus reacted at all. But Aleph could feel the rush of stark panic under her skin. "What am I going to do, Aleph?" she said. Her voice sounded calm, but her blood was screaming in Aleph's ears.

"Tell me something to keep her happy. We can buy time, at least."

Lazarus' eyes clouded over under their dark brows. "I can't tell you. It's the price of my freedom."

"You will have no freedom if you don't! Please, give me something."

Lazarus turned her back and stood thinking for several moments. Then she looked back over her shoulder. "Let me show you something," she said.

She went to the corner of the room farthest from the eye of the light. Kneeling, she used her knife to pry off a small false panel near the floor. With a mysterious smile, she gestured to Aleph to come over.

Sitting cross-legged, Lazarus carefully laid out five tools in a semicircle. One by one she pointed to her treasures. "Razor. Wire. Cyanide. And this one is my favorite." She picked up the small antique handgun, survivor from an age when weapons were art. Its black surface shone with careful polishing. When she snapped open the cartridge chamber, it clicked with a well-oiled, satisfied sound.

Lazarus picked up three bullets, the last items in the line, and loaded the gun. She cradled it carefully in her hands, looking at it. "This is the one I'll use, I think, if they ever come to take me. I sometimes imagine how it would be."

Slowly, she turned the gun around till it faced her. Her eyes closed for a moment, as if to still her heart. Then, slowly, she lifted the gun to her forehead. As she pressed it between her eyebrows, her face took on a strange, rapt expression. She drew back the hammer.

Aleph watched, frozen, not daring to make even a sound. But as she saw Lazarus' finger tense on the trigger, a tiny protest escaped her. Lazarus' eyes snapped open. She lowered the gun, uncocked it. "That's how it would be," she said.

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Aleph closed her eyes, inexpressibly relieved. Lazarus put a hand on her shoulder.

"Would you be sorry if I did it?" Lazarus said.

"Yes. I would sorry."

"Listen, then. I'll tell you this: the longevity formula is not a serum. It's a virus. Just knowing that much is useless. But tell it to her; it will keep her guessing."

"Thank you," Aleph breathed.

THAT NIGHT, Aleph tried to reach Johanson on the terminal. She could get no live response. At last she typed her information in and sent it to a secure mailbox, labeled for her employer's eyes only.

The next morning when she woke, the message light was blinking. Without bothering to dress, she sat down at the terminal, pushed her hair out of her eyes, and accessed the message.

So it's a virus. Tell me something I didn't know. Johanson.

Aleph glowered at the screen. Johanson had missed the point. It was not important whether she knew; Lazarus had thought she didn't know.

As Aleph watched, a second message scrolled onto the screen.

I have decided you are unlikely to learn anything more of value. I am therefore terminating your contract. Be ready to return to Earth when the guard comes to fetch you.

A hundred arguments crowded into Aleph's brain. She hadn't had a chance. Interrogations like this took time; didn't the old tyrant know that? The process had barely started, and yet there had been good progress. Furiously, she began pounding an impassioned reply into the keyboard. When it filled the screen, she stopped, looked at it, and erased it without sending. She rose and paced across the room.

She could not let Johanson think it was mere personal desire that made her want to finish the job. She had to couch it in professional terms. And yet desire throbbed hot inside her. A week was all she asked. A week to become fully individuated, to soak in Lazarus' character, to experience it

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fully. She must not, she *could* not, leave now.

Forcing herself to think coolly, she sat down and typed in a response, this time short and rationally persuasive. She pressed "Send" and waited.

No answer appeared. Aleph cursed under her breath, then got up to wash and dress. When she had finished, her mind was made up: she would have to talk to Johanson in person.

She strode to the door. It would not budge. She rattled it, threw her shoulder against it, swore at it, but it remained shut. She was a prisoner.

She lay back on her bed, mind racing. Had Johanson intuited her unnatural involvement in the job, and decided she was a security risk? Or was this all a pretense to keep her off-balance and under control? She saw shadows of deception and manipulation everywhere.

She tried to force herself to memorize the precious fullness of personhood inside her. She wanted to remember it, but knew she would not. It would fade away, as a hundred other personalities had faded, till she had no self even to long for it back.

Her own heart beat like approaching footsteps. Every now and then, she roused onto one elbow, thinking someone was coming. But it was only her heart.

At last a soft knock sounded on her door. She stared resentfully for several seconds. When at last she peeled off her bed and went to the door, it opened freely in her hand. No guard stood there. She stepped out into the hall. Lounging against the wall behind the door was Lazarus, dressed in a black guard's uniform, a plastic helmet under her arm. She grinned like a naughty child.

"How did you —," Aleph started. In answer, Lazarus held up a cafeteria knife with a magnetic strip pasted on the blade. Aleph looked down at her door lock, where the key card was supposed to fit, and shook her head.

"You're my prisoner now," Lazarus said, fitting the helmet over her black curls and snapping down the reflective eyeshade. Her body took on the tense stance of a guard. When she gestured with her fist, the flash of silver in her hand looked like a stun gun.

They went down the hall together, Lazarus directing the way. When they passed some people, Aleph looked past them with a jaunty, defiant stare. Their eyes followed her, sparing not a glance for the guard at her back.

They turned into a little-used service tunnel, then took a spiral stair-

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case down three levels till it ended in a dimly lit hall full of storage crates. Lazarus paused to remove her helmet.

"How did you get free?" Aleph asked.

Lazarus gave a low chuckle. "I still have some friends."

Past the tangle of crates, they came out onto a balcony overlooking a vast, curving gallery that ran around the outer shell of the satellite. Below them, what should have been floor was paved in glass windows looking out on the dark sky. Above hung a ceiling of plants growing downward. The smell was like a midsummer night, heavy as narcotic.

Lazarus slipped through the balcony railing and lowered herself down till her feet met the windows. She walked out on the glass, looking as if she were treading the sky. She gestured to Aleph to follow. "Don't worry; it won't break." Carefully, Aleph lowered herself from the balcony. It was eerie, walking on nothing.

In the windows to their left, the huge arc of Earth was rising, speeding with the spin of the drum. They walked toward it till it lay below their feet, blue-green seas swirling with clouds. An uneven stretch of brown coastline interrupted the smooth expanse of water.

Lazarus spoke softly. "'O Earth, how like to Heaven, with what delight could I have walked thee round. . . .'" She turned to Aleph. Her face glowed with a thin sheen of sweat in the earthlight. "I love this place. I can believe I am an angel here, standing in the sky, looking down on Earth with the secret of eternal life in my hands. I think sometimes I could break through this glass and fly down there like Prometheus."

"Do you know what I see?" Aleph said, looking down past her feet. "Down there, to me, is just a fog of humanity. You can't breathe without smelling their instincts on the wind." She knelt to touch the glass. "Out beyond this window is the only place it's clean, truly clean."

Before she could rise, Lazarus was kneeling beside her, grasping her shoulders in strong hands, looking deeply into her face. "I was wrong, wasn't I? You're the only angel here. You exist in your selfless state of grace, like a bodhisattva in samadhi. Except, we keep thrusting our karma upon you. You are truly free, yet we try to imprison you." She touched Aleph's face gently. "What would be Heaven for you, Aleph? Being alone? Being free of us all?"

Aleph looked down. The thought of being herself again, as she must, seemed maddeningly vacuous. She wanted to draw out every moment in

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which she could still be Lazarus.

"My life isn't what you think," she said. "It's like being a screen on which other people's lives are shown. It's never knowing who I am or who I will be tomorrow."

"But you have all the bodies and minds in the world to choose from. You can live a hundred lives, and when you are tired of each one, start another."

Inside her, Aleph could feel Lazarus' rebelliousness making her angry with her own hurt and helplessness. "But none of them is *me*."

Lazarus was smiling as if at something immensely sad and immensely true, something only she would ever see. "So what is the solution? Do you want to become human?"

Below them the other rim of the planet was already wheeling into view, beyond it blackness and stars. Aleph felt as if she knelt on the edge of Earth, of all that was familiar. She could feel the abstract emptiness of her self, waiting just beyond the boundaries of Lazarus' influence.

"I don't want to be any human," she said; "I want to be you."

Lazarus' heavy eyelids closed for a moment; she breathed out, and Aleph felt the air stir on her cheek. Lazarus put a hand to her pocket and drew out a small box bound in red leather. Her finger pressed a catch, and it sprang open. Inside was a hypodermic."

"I can give you my blood," she said.

Did it matter? Aleph wondered. She was already addicted.

Lazarus laid light fingers on the back of her neck. "Do you want it?"

"Yes." Aleph rolled up her sleeve.

"Let me have yours as well. Then we shall be blood sisters." Lazarus expertly tied a rubber constrictor around Aleph's arm, then pierced her vein and drew off blood as dark and pulsing as any human's. She then tied the band around her own arm, injected the blood, and drew off a second vial of her own. Without pausing, she grasped Aleph's elbow and plunged the needle in.

There was no sensation, no change. Lazarus was watching her intently. "Now we are neither of us angels," she said softly. "Now I can ask you to make love to me."

Aleph's heart began beating fast, laboring over the alien blood. "Here?" she asked, looking up to the dark balcony above them, the shadows on the ceiling shifting as the earthlight passed.

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"Why not? No one is watching. Even if they were. . . ." Lazarus' head jerked up abruptly, the cords in her neck taut. "Do you hear that, Johanson?" she shouted. "We are going to act human here, in front of all these stars! And you can't stop us."

The aftershocks of the sudden shout echoed in the empty room. Lazarus turned back to Aleph, her face blazing with a wild smile. "My God, you look like me," she said, and then her mouth was upon Aleph's, lips nursing identical lips. Aleph slipped a hand inside Lazarus' uniform, feeling the wonder of smooth skin, the muscular buttocks, the teasing prickle of hair, and knew it was her own body her fingers explored. Lazarus' strong lips were on her shoulders, her breast, and she knew that her arousal was Lazarus' as well. Without a word, they stood ritually to undress each other, knowing instinctively every touch and timing. They clasped naked, body to body, upon the glass floor, as the Moon rose beneath them.

Aleph woke with a headache gnawing at the backs of her eyes. She rolled over and became aware that every inch of her body ached. Her throat was parched. She rose and stumbled into the sanitary alcove. As she drank, her eye fell on the Persian carpet, and she realized she was not in her own room.

The reaction had come over her as she had been lying in Lazarus' arms, watching the Earth speed by beneath them. Nausea and shooting pains had racked her as her body fought back against the invading infection of humanity. She couldn't have gotten back on her own. Lazarus had helped her through the halls to her room. No, to Lazarus' room.

"Well, well, well," said Johanson's voice. "That was a nice try."

Disoriented, Aleph looked around. At last she realized the voice came from the terminal. She went into the bedroom and saw Johanson's face on the screen.

"Go away. It has nothing to do with you," she said, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Aren't you going to ask where your lover is?" Johanson said mockingly.

"Where is she?" Aleph asked dully.

"She's free," Johanson said. "She went back to Earth on the shuttle this morning. As you will never do, Lazarus."

The words froze in Aleph's throat. "What are you talking about?" she said at last. "I'm not Lazarus."

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"Oh, spare me the charade," Johanson groaned. "I saw through your little plot before you even thought of it. Magic tricks, eh? Trying to switch bodies on me? Pathetic, Lazarus. You forgot there was still a way to distinguish the two of you, no matter how close you got. You have the longevity virus in your blood. She didn't. A blood test; that's all it took. Maybe you thought I didn't know you'd tried the virus on yourself. Well, surprise."

Aleph's mind was racing. She thought of the vial of blood Lazarus had drawn from her arm before it was tainted. Lazarus had needed that blood to smuggle herself through Johanson's net. Magic tricks, indeed. Aleph had seen Lazarus inject it into her own arm; but had there been only one hpyodermic?

"Listen, I can tell you how she did it," Aleph said urgently. "She switched blood on you. She has allies to help her, you know. You've got to believe me: I'm not Lazarus. I'll tell you things she couldn't know. I'll—"

"Tell the walls," Johanson said. "You'll have plenty of time. I've given the order to have you transferred upstairs. There's a box with your name on it, Lazarus, and in a few minutes, you're going to be in it."

"Stop!" Aleph screamed; but the monitor had gone blank. Terror blinded her; she stood clenching her fists, trying to fight it down. This is Lazarus' fear, not mine, she told herself. But a mocking voice replied, You *are* Lazarus now. Forever. You are bound by the chains of her blood; you will never be free of her fears.

She caught a glimpse of Lazarus in the mirror and turned to face her. "You dirt!" she shouted. "How can you leave me here like this? I *trusted* you!"

Her head swam; the lights seemed to be dimming. She blinked to get her sight back. But no; the lights actually *had* dimmed. Suddenly the whole wall lit up with an image of Johanson's face, yellowed teeth grinning at her. She backed away till she hit the edge of the bed and her legs collapsed under her.

"Is that any way to talk to your lover, Lazarus? After what you tried to do to her? You're the filth, you sodomite. I only wish you had a hundred lives for me to keep you boxed."

Aleph put her hands over her ears. All she could hear was the thump, thump of the guards coming to take her off to her coffin. Suddenly her eyes fell on the panel in the corner. Lazarus' suicide trove. She lunged

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across the room and pried at the panel with her fingernails till it came loose. She seized the pistol, wheeled around, and fired at the opposite wall. The bullet lodged itself in the image of Johanson's left eye. The projection disappeared.

The room seemed unnaturally quiet. Aleph stood, her ears ringing from the explosion, then slowly turned the gun around to point it at her own face. This was what the weapon was for; it was why Lazarus had shown it to her. A last gift of kindness, perhaps. She raised it till the barrel pressed against her forehead.

And then lowered it. She realized, with a little surprise, that Lazarus was incapable of suicide. She was incapable of not hoping, not planning. Not seeking revenge. She faced the mirror.

"I'll get out of here," she said to Lazarus. "I swear I'll be free someday. Not even you can stop me. And when I come looking for you, by God you'll regret it."

There were footsteps at her door, then voices. "Watch out, she's got a gun," one warned.

Smiling secretively, Aleph laid the gun down on the dresser. As she did, she noticed a book of poetry lying open there, practically under her fingers. Four lines were underscored:

If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free;
Angels alone that soar above
Enjoy such liberty.

When the door burst open and filled with uniformed muscle, Aleph was waiting calmly. "Well, let's go," she said.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

WORLDS IN ORDER

I WAS AT a small science fiction convention here in Manhattan a month ago, as I write this, and I was accosted by a young writer. The following conversation took place.

Writer: "Dr. Asimov, I've been trying to write for a number of years and I've managed to sell a couple of items."

Asimov: "Congratulations! I'm happy to hear it. Keep it up."

Writer: "I've used you as my model. I've read a lot about you and I thought that I would try to write the way you do. Easily. Copiously. All that sort of stuff."

Asimov (cautiously): "And have you managed?"

Writer (frowning): "No, I haven't. I have to keep thinking about what I write, and more thinking. And rewriting. And starting over. And getting stuck for periods of time."

Asimov (uneasily): "I'm sorry."

Writer (perceptibly angrier): "I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. So I talked to other writers, and I found they all have the same trouble. Just like me. There's nothing wrong with me."

Asimov (relieved): "I'm sure there isn't."

Writer (pointing his finger in a controlled fury): "But I'll tell you what. There is something seriously wrong with *You*!"

Asimov (wincing): "If you had consulted me in the matter, I'd have told you that to begin with." (But he turned and stamped away.)

I've never denied that I was peculiar, you see — and not just in my writing technique, but in many ways. I accept that, know about it in detail, and manage to live with it. After all, we're all peculiar in some way or another, and happy is he (or she) who knows the nature of the peculiarity and can make it work for him (or her).

One of my peculiarities is that I love to count and measure and

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compare and make lists— orderly lists. Why that should be, I don't know, unless it's just to keep my mind occupied when there is any danger of its lying fallow. (I can't bear having my mind go into neutral, and if necessary I'll count the holes in acoustical tiles in the ceiling rather than allow it to do so.)

In any case, the recent Voyager 2 flyby of Neptune has slightly upset the order of the listing of Triton among the objects of the Solar system, so I thought I'd expose all of you to the matter of this particular peculiarity of mine — but please don't get annoyed with me because of that, after the fashion of the young writer at the recent convention.

The Solar system contains countless bodies. A very few are large, but many are mountain-size, many more boulder-size, still more pinhead-size, and dust-size, even down to atomic-size. It is inconceivable that I (or anyone) can list all the bodies of the Solar system in order of size, and I won't try. I'll just list the twenty-seven largest bodies in order — with some discussion along the way, of course.

Obviously, the largest object in the Solar system is the Sun, but the extent to which it predominates is not always grasped. Diagrams of the Solar system show the outsweep of the planetary orbits and, at the center, a tiny, tiny Sun, and that gives us a false idea.

Actually, the Sun has a mass that is 333,000 times that of the Earth. If you could imagine a huge pair of scales operating under a vast gravitational field, and if you put the Sun in one of the scales, you would have to pile in 333,000 objects the mass of the Earth in the other, in order to balance them. Or, if you prefer, if the Sun were a million dollars, the Earth would be three bucks.

The Sun is, on the average, less dense than the Earth and, kilogram for kilogram, takes up more room. The volume of the Sun is 1,303,000 times that of the Earth. Suppose you imagine a huge hollow container the size and the shape of the Sun. Imagine taking up a solid object the size of the Earth, grinding it into dust and pouring that dust into the Sun-container. You would have to grind up 1,303,000 Earths to fill the Sun-container.

But suppose we consider not only the Earth, but all the planets that circle the Sun, all the satellites that accompany the planets, all the asteroids and meteoroids, all the comets near and far, all the dust. All this material that circles the Sun we can call the "planetary system."

The entire planetary system has

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448 times the mass of the Earth alone. That, however, means that the Sun, all by itself, is 743.3 times as massive as all the myriad bodies that circle it. Another way of putting it is that the Sun contains 99.866 percent of all the mass of the Solar system.

Some dispassionate observer, viewing the Solar system with cold eyes attuned only to the presence of mass, might feel justified in saying that the Solar system consisted of a single luminous Sun, with some inconsiderable dregs of nonluminous matter circling it.

It is only because we live on one of those dregs and know that it carries a rich load of life, that keeps us from stopping the study of the Solar system with the Sun alone. (We are forced by circumstances to consider all other stellar systems as made up of luminous bodies only. We have no detail on any planetary systems other than our own.)

It is very difficult, of course, to grasp numbers in the hundreds of thousands and in the millions, so let us compare the Sun and the Earth on the basis of diameters. This is a one-dimensional comparison that is the cube root of the three-dimensional comparison of volume, and therefore gives us a much smaller figure, more easily grasped. The diameter of the Sun is 109.25 times that of the Earth. Whereas the Earth's diameter is 12,756 kilometers (7,914 miles), that of the sun is 1,394,000 kilometers (866,000 miles).

Mass is more fundamental a property of an object than is diameter, of course, and I will mention mass when that is useful; but I will cling to diameter for the purpose of visualization.

Now let us shift to the planetary system and note that its most prominent members are four planets that, by Earthly standards, may be considered giants. They are Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune in that order of distance from the Sun.

Of these, Jupiter is the largest. Just to make sure you understand that "large" is a relative term, the Sun has 1,048 times the mass of Jupiter, and has a diameter 9.8 times that of Jupiter. It would take nearly ten Jupiters side by side to stretch across the full width of the Sun.

If, however, we forget the Sun and confine ourselves to the planetary system only, then Jupiter is an impressive giant indeed. Its mass is 317.83 times that of the Earth and its equatorial diameter is 11.8 times that of Earth. Roughly speaking, Earth is to Jupiter, as Jupiter is to the Sun.

We can be a bit more dramatic. Jupiter contains 71 percent of all the mass of the planetary system. It

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is 2.5 times as massive as all the other planets, satellites, comets, asteroids, meteoroids, and dust of the planetary system put together.

Suppose we add to Jupiter the other three giant planets. Saturn has a mass equal to 95.15 times that of Earth; Uranus has a mass equal to 14.54 times that of Earth; and Neptune has a mass equal to 17.23 times that of Earth.

These three giant planets, taken together, have a mass equal to 126.92 times that of Earth, but, even so, these three, taken together, have a mass that is only 2/5 that of Jupiter alone. Now add Jupiter, and all four giant planets have a mass equal to 1/750 that of the Sun.

The four giant planets, taken together, make up 99.25 percent of the total mass of the planetary system (that is, remember, the Solar system minus the Sun). This means that the Sun and the four giant planets (the five largest objects in the Solar system) make up 99.999 percent of the mass of the Solar system. All the matter in the Solar system outside the Sun and the four giant planets make up not quite 1/100,000 of the whole.

An observer studying the Solar system dispassionately, and finding himself capable of bringing the giant planets to his notice, could reasonably say that the Solar system consisted of one star, four planets and some traces of debris.

In one respect, incidentally, the giant planets outmeasure the Sun. The original cloud of dust and gas that formed the Solar system turned slowly on its axis and, therefore, possessed a quantity of what is referred to as "angular momentum." Any system that remains isolated always contains the same quantity of angular momentum, neither losing nor gaining any with time.

The angular momentum depends on both the speed of rotation and on the average distance of the rotating parts from the center. If one of these properties decreases, the other must increase, and vice versa. As the original cloud contracted, and the distances of its parts from the center decreased, the speed of rotation increased. All the bodies of the planetary system are now rotating at various speeds about their axes, and are revolving about the Sun; or about a planet which is revolving about the Sun. The Sun also rotates about its axis.

The Sun, however, has retained only about 2 percent of the total angular momentum of the Solar system. The other 98 percent is to be found in the planetary system and, chiefly, in the four giant planets. Jupiter, all by itself, contains over 60 percent of the angular momentum of the Solar system. The four giant planets, taken together,

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contain 97 percent of the angular momentum, while all the bodies of the planetary system other than those four possess the remaining 1 percent of the angular momentum.

This represents a serious problem. How can so much of the angular momentum be concentrated in the relatively small planets and so little in the vast central Sun? This remained a nagging problem, which was solved in recent decades by taking electromagnetic fields into account.

Consider planetary rotations. Jupiter, the largest planet, rotates about its axis in 9.9 hours. Saturn, smaller and more distant from the Sun, has a longer rotational period of 10.6 hours. Uranus, still smaller and more distant, has one of 17.2 hours. Well, then, does this mean that the rotation period grows longer with greater distance, or with smaller size?

The answer might lie with Neptune, which is more distant than Uranus but is also slightly larger. The Voyager 2 flyby in August, 1989 showed that Neptune had a shorter rotational period than Uranus, rotating in 16.0 hours. Apparently, the period decreases with increase in mass, regardless of distance. Perhaps the more massive the planet, the greater the supply of angular momentum it gathered.

Then, too, the atmospheric activity of a planet depends upon the temperature differentials maintained within it, and it would seem that this differential would have to depend on the heat received from the Sun. If we set the heat per unit surface area received from the Sun by Jupiter as 1, then that received by the more distant Saturn is about 0.30, while Uranus receives 0.074 and Neptune 0.030.

It is no surprise, then, that Jupiter has a furiously active atmosphere; that Saturn's is milder, and that Uranus (receiving only 1/13 the heat of Jupiter) is a relatively quiet planet. But what about Neptune? It gets only 1/33 the heat that Jupiter does and only 2.5 the heat that Uranus does. Surely, it should be even quieter than Uranus.

Well, it isn't. The Voyager 2 flyby showed that Neptune's atmosphere had winds of 640 kilometers (400 miles) an hour and more. Neptune also had a "dark spot" very much the shape, and in very much the relative position, of Jupiter's "red spot."

You might argue, of course, that the Sun is not the only possible source of heat for the giant planets. The planetary cores are extremely hot, and heat may leak up to the surface from below. The larger the planet, the greater the central heat, and the greater the contribution thereof to atmospheric activity.

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Neptune may be considerably farther from the Sun than Uranus is, but it is also more massive than Uranus, and might that account for the additional heat required for its active atmosphere? Somehow, I don't think so. Neptune is less than 20 percent more massive than Uranus, and surely that isn't enough to account for the difference in activity. It's a mystery.

It's time to get to the diameters of the giant planets. In rapidly rotating objects, the diameter varies with direction, because there is an equatorial bulge due to a centrifugal effect. The "equatorial diameter" is the longest and I will use that.

For Jupiter, the equatorial diameter is 142,800 kilometers (88,700 miles); for Saturn it is 120,660 kilometers (75,000 miles); for Neptune it is 25,100 kilometers (15,600 miles); and for Uranus it is 24,500 kilometers (15,220 miles). These bodies are the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th largest objects in the Solar system, therefore.

Let us now move on to objects smaller than Uranus. The one that is in 6th place happens to be (hurrah!) the Earth.

It isn't much of a world compared to the objects we've mentioned, to be sure. Earth's mass is a little less than 7 percent that of 5th place Uranus.

Look at it in another way, though. I have said that everything in the Solar system other than the Sun and the four giant planets makes up only about 1/100,000 of the whole, and may be regarded as "traces of debris." If we leave out the comets (whose numbers and total mass we can only make vague guesses concerning) we can say that the Earth's mass is just about half of the total of these traces of debris.

Earth is found in the "inner Solar system," which includes those regions closer to the Sun than the orbit of Jupiter. In the inner Solar system there are to be found other objects, of course, and three of them are, by Earthly standards, sizable planets.

One is Venus, which is almost as large as Earth is. Its mass is 81.5 percent that of Earth, or just over 4/5. In terms of mass, Venus is to Earth, very nearly as Uranus is to Neptune, so that just as Uranus and Neptune are the twin planets of the outer Solar system, Earth and Venus are the twin planets of the inner Solar system.

Venus and Earth are twins only in size, however. In every other respect, they are startlingly unlike. Earth is, as we know, moderate in temperature, with a water ocean, and with swarms of life. Venus is extremely hot, is utterly dry, and utterly dead. Earth rotates in 24

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hours west to east, while Venus rotates in 244 days east to west. Earth has a thin atmosphere loaded with oxygen, while Venus has a thick atmosphere that is almost entirely carbon dioxide; and so on.

Earth and Venus together make up almost seven-eighths of those traces of debris I talk about.

In terms of diameter, Earth's is 12,756 kilometers (7,926 miles) while Venus, the 7th largest object in the Solar system, has one of 12,140 kilometers (7,544 miles).

That brings us to Mars, the 8th largest object in the Solar system. Mars is so famous a world, and we talk so much about it, that most people probably don't realize how small it is. Once you talk about its polar icecaps and its rotation period of 24.6 hours, its canyons, its volcanoes, its dried river beds, you begin to think of it as an Earth-like world, and therefore perhaps an Earth-sized world.

However, it is not. The mass of Mars is only about 1/10 that of Earth and only 1/8 that of Venus. Its diameter is 6,790 kilometers (4,219 miles), only a little over half that of Earth. Its surface area is only 28.3 percent that of Earth. Mars has no surface water, however, so that all its surface is land area, and this is just about as large as Earth's land area. Small as it is, Mars is a respectable world.

Of all the objects smaller than Mars that circle the Sun and that may therefore be called planets in the widest definition of the term, the largest is Mercury, yet it is *not* the ninth largest object in the Solar system.

In addition to the planets, there are other objects that circle one planet or another and that are carried in the grip of that planet's gravitational field around the Sun. These planet-circlers are "satellites."*

Satellites are, on the whole, much smaller than planets are. Not one satellite, for instance, is the size of Mars. Two of the satellites, however, are larger than Mercury. One of these is Jupiter's largest satellite, Ganymede, which has a diameter of 5,262 kilometers (3,270 miles). Then comes Saturn's largest satellite, Titan, which has a diameter of 5,150 kilometers (3,200 miles). Compare these with Mercury, which has a diameter of 4,878 kilometers (3,031 miles).

By diameter, then, Ganymede is the 9th largest object in the Solar system, Titan is the 10th, and Mercury is the 11th.

* *In the press and TV, they are often called "moons," which is incorrect. "Moon" is the name given to Earth's satellite, and to call other satellites "moons" is about the equivalent of calling other planets "earths."*

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Here, though, we are running counter to mass. Ganymede is 780 million kilometers (485 million miles) from the Sun, and Titan is farther still, at 1,425 million kilometers (885 million miles). Both are cold worlds made up largely of icy materials that are comparatively light. (Titan is even cold enough to retain a rather thick atmosphere.)

Mercury, however, is very close to the Sun, remaining at an average distance of 58 million kilometers (36 million miles) from it. Mercury is therefore a hot planet formed out of materials that can stand the heat — rock and metal.

Mercury's rock and metal are far denser than the ices of Ganymede and Titan. Therefore, though the volume of Mercury is only 85 percent of Titan and only 80 percent of Ganymede, Mercury is 2¼ times as massive as Ganymede, and 2½ times as massive as Titan.

Does that mean we should consider Mercury larger than either satellite and give *it* the 9th place? No, for two reasons. First, mass is harder to measure than diameter for the smaller objects of the Solar system, and we couldn't make up a neat listing with mass as the basis. Second, mass isn't visible to the eye, while diameter is. If we were to place scale models of Ganymede, Titan, and Mercury side by side, anyone looking at the three globes would judge Mercury to be the smallest, so that's how we'll leave it.

There are five other satellites that are of respectable size and that can be lumped together, with Ganymede and Titan, as "the large satellites." The five include three satellites of Jupiter: Callisto, Io, and Europa. It also includes Neptune's largest satellite, Triton, and Earth's only satellite, the Moon.

Of these five, Callisto is the largest and is in 12th place, while Io is next and is in 13th. Callisto has a diameter of 4,800 kilometers (2,980 miles) and Io has one of 3,630 kilometers (2,260 miles).

That brings us to 14th place, and until recently it was thought that Neptune's satellite, Triton, was in that slot. Of course, Triton is so far away that there isn't a hope of being able to measure its diameter with anything like accuracy by Earth-sightings. Triton's apparent brightness could be measured, however. If Triton reflected the same percentage of the light that falls upon it as other distant satellites do whose diameter *is* known, then, from Triton's brightness, and allowing for its distance, its diameter could be estimated. Its diameter was therefore thought to be 3,500 kilometers (2,175 miles), which would have placed it in 14th place.

The Voyager 2 flyby of Neptune, however, got a close look at Triton

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and found that its surface was slicked with frozen methane that reflected most of the feeble light of the distant Sun that fell on it. Triton was therefore shinier than had been thought, and a considerably smaller Triton would reflect enough light to make it appear as bright as it does in Earth's telescopes.

The 14th place was therefore passed on to the Moon, which has a diameter of 3,475 kilometers (2,160 miles). In 15th place is Europa with a diameter of 3,138 kilometers (1,950 miles). And it is in 16th place that we now find Triton, with a diameter of 2,735 kilometers (1,700 miles).

Your Earthly patriotism may be disturbed at the fact that there are four satellites larger than our Moon, but remember that the Earth is a small planet to have so large a satellite. Of the seven largest satellites, the Moon is by far the largest relative to the planet it circles.

Ganymede, Jupiter's largest satellite, has a diameter that is only 3.7 percent (1/27) that of Jupiter. Titan, Saturn's largest satellite, does a bit better, for Titan's diameter is 4.3 percent (1/23) that of Saturn. Triton, Neptune's largest satellite, has a diameter 5.4 percent (1/18) that of Neptune. The Moon, however, has a diameter of 27 percent (over 1/4) that of Earth. You can almost think of Earth and Moon as a double planet.

So far, we have considered the Sun, eight planets, and seven satellites, filling up the first 16 places. Where next?

There is one more planet, with its orbit lying almost entirely beyond that of Neptune, and it is Pluto. It was thought to be quite large when first discovered, but closer and closer inspection has caused it to seem ever smaller (see THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING PLANET, F & SF, March, 1987).

It turns out that Pluto is smaller than any of the seven large satellites and has a diameter of only 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles). It is in 17th place.

After that, there are four satellites to be considered. There are Uranus's two largest satellites, for instance. Of these, Titania has a diameter of 1,610 kilometers (1,000 miles) and Oberon has one of 1,550 kilometers (960 miles). Following them are Saturn's second and third largest satellites: Rhea, with a diameter 1,530 kilometers (950 miles) and Iapetus with one of 1,435 kilometers (890 miles). These fill places 18, 19, 20, and 21 respectively.

Then comes a surprise. In 1978, it was discovered that Pluto has a satellite, Charon. This satellite turns out to have a diameter of 1,200 kilometers (745 miles) so that

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it goes into 22nd place. Its diameter is just about half that of Pluto, so that Pluto-Charon is a much better candidate for a double planet than Earth-Moon is. (Sorry, folks.)

After this, there come four more satellites. There are two of Uranus's satellites: Umbriel, with a diameter of 1,190 kilometers (740 miles), and Ariel at 1,160 kilometers (720 miles). Then there are two of Saturn's satellites: Dione at 1,120 kilometers (695 miles) and Tethyus at 1,048 kilometers (740 miles). These four fill places 23, 24, 25, and 26 respectively.

That brings us back to the planets. There are tens of thousands of small planetary bodies circling the Sun, mainly between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. These are the "asteroids" and the largest of them is Ceres, which with a diameter of 940 kilometers (585 miles) fits into 27th place.

Beyond that there are many satellites, asteroids, comets, and miscellaneous bits of matter. Let us stop with Ceres, then, and, for convenience's sake, here is a tabulation of the results:

Object	Diameter (kilometers)	Diameter (miles)	Diameter (Moon = 1)
1 - Sun	1,394,000	866,000	401
2 - Jupiter	142,800	88,700	41
3 - Saturn	120,600	75,000	34.7
4 - Neptune	25,100	15,600	7.2
5 - Uranus	24,500	15,220	7.0
6 - Earth	12,756	7,926	3.67
7 - Venus	12,140	7,544	3.50
8 - Mars	6,790	4,219	1.95
9 - Ganymede	5,262	3,270	1.51
10 - Titan	5,150	3,200	1.48
11 - Mercury	4,878	3,031	1.40
12 - Callisto	4,800	2,980	1.38
13 - Io	3,630	2,260	1.05
14 - Moon	3,476	2,160	1.00
15 - Europa	3,138	1,950	0.90
16 - Triton	2,735	1,700	0.78
17 - Pluto	2,500	1,550	0.72
18 - Titania	1,610	1,000	0.46

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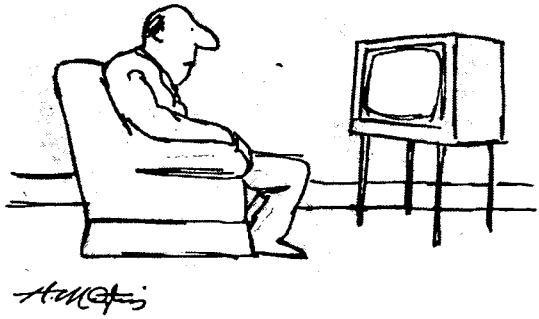
19 - Oberon	1,550	960	0.444
20 - Rhea	1,530	950	0.440
21 - Iapetus	1,435	890	0.412
22 - Charon	1,200	745	0.345
23 - Umbriel	1,190	740	0.343
24 - Ariel	1,160	720	0.333
25 - Dione	1,120	695	0.322
26 - Tethys	1,048	650	0.301
27 - Ceres	940	585	0.271

What's the good of this list? Well, it's pretty, and I don't know that it exists precisely in this form anywhere else. I like things that are pretty, and orderly, and different. After all, as I told you, I'm peculiar.

AN EVENING WITH THE LAST MAN ON EARTH



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Bradley Denton's last story here was "The Sin-Eater of the Kaw" (June 1989). His new story is about Amanda, who decides on several occasions to become a martyr but who turns into something quite different.

The Chaff He Will Burn

By Bradley Denton

AMANDA'S PARENTS HATED each other, and they didn't seem to like her, either. They expected her to be perfect, and she wasn't. So one Sunday night in June, while most of Spring Hill slept, seven-year-old Amanda lay awake and decided to burn herself to death in public.

Earlier that day, in Sunday school, she had learned that martyrs for Jesus were mourned more thoroughly than just about anyone. She had therefore resolved to become a martyr as soon as possible, and had asked her teacher to explain the requirements.

Her teacher said that the first martyr, Stephen, had set a precedent by provoking a mob of Jews into stoning him. Despite that precedent, however, other methods of martyrdom had become accepted over the years.

Some martyrs were stabbed with swords.

Some were crushed under boulders.

Some were pierced through and through with arrows.

Some were fed to lions.

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Some were tortured with hot irons and then dragged by the ankles to dungeons, their heads bumping on stone steps as they descended.

Some were crucified upside down.

Some were stretched on racks or between oxen until they came apart.

Some were burned at the stake.

Some were placed in towers where the wind whistled through slits and tormented them until they clawed their ears to shreds and died of madness.

There was a lot to choose from.

Amanda got out of bed and went to a corner of her room to stand on her head. She wasn't able to stay there for long, though, because she had a runny nose and could feel the mucus pooling up behind her eyes. Upside-down crucifixion, she decided, wouldn't do.

Once in bed again, she imagined herself being stoned. The scenario was appealing (how her parents would cringe as each rock struck her face!), but she had to reject it because she didn't think she could find a mob of Jews in central Nebraska.

It occurred to her then that most of the other methods of martyrdom had a similar drawback. They required the assistance of non-Christians, and she didn't know any.

The only method that she felt she could handle by herself was that of burning. Ideally, it was supposed to be "burning at the stake," which implied both a stake and someone to tie her to it. But surely a stake was secondary; the fire was the thing.

The more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea. A fire was something people couldn't help noticing — and if she had a sizable audience, they would talk about the event for years to come. Future generations of Spring Hill children would grow up hearing the story.

Such an audience, she realized, was only a few days away. Spring Hill's annual fair, the Summer Celebration, was to be held at the park the very next weekend, and her Sunday school class was scheduled to sing on Friday evening. It would be perfect.

Amanda hardly slept that night. (She might not have been able to sleep anyway, because her parents were yelling.) She didn't know how she would be able to contain her excitement through the coming week.

On Friday evening, Amanda's sno-cone melted to green water that

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stained her hands. Flies kept landing on her fingers to eat the sugar.

She crushed the paper cone and threw it into a barrel. Then she asked her mother if she could go to the car to wash her hands with the water jug. Her nose was still runny, and she sniffled as she spoke.

Amanda's mother gave her the car keys and told her to go directly to the amphitheater as soon as her hands were clean. She wasn't even looking at Amanda, but at Amanda's father, who was talking to a high school girl at the Pop the Balloons booth.

The sun had gone behind the steeple of the Methodist church when Amanda unlocked the car and climbed into the front seat. The clock on the dash showed that twelve minutes remained until her class had to sing. She took a book of matches from the ashtray and watched the clock count off seconds with blinking dots.

After five minutes she looked out to see whether her parents were coming to check on her. Neither of them was. The strings of lights on the carnival rides had been turned on, though, and they were pretty. Amanda rolled down the window to hear the grunts and roars of the engines and the happy cries of the people being whirled around.

When it was time, she went outside and opened the car trunk. The red two-gallon gasoline can that her father kept for emergencies was wedged between the spare tire and the left wheel well. It was stuck tight, but came free after four hard tugs. The gasoline inside sloshed, and the walls of the can went *boing-boom, boing-boom.* Amanda set the can on the pavement and twisted off the cap with her sticky hands. The gasoline had a sharp, delicious stink.

Amanda threw the cap into the trunk, picked up the can, and went back into the park. The can was heavy, so she carried it with both hands, crushing the matchbook against the handle. She had to walk bowlegged, and gasoline splashed onto her wrists. It made the fine hair on her arms stand up. Some of the people she passed looked at her, but no one spoke to her.

As she approached the amphitheater, the noise of the rides was replaced by the sound of applause. The five- and six-year-olds' Sunday school class had finished singing, and Amanda's class would be taking the stage at any moment.

She hurried through a cluster of evergreens to the edge of the amphitheater, and then she paused to look out at her audience. Forty or fifty

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parents, plus several old folks from the nursing home, were sitting on lawn chairs and blankets. At the bottom of the slope stood a wooden platform illuminated by portable floodlights. The five- and six-year-olds were trooping down steps at one end, and Amanda's classmates were ascending steps at the other.

She took a breath and burst from the evergreens, running through the audience with the can banging against her knees. When she reached the platform, she stumbled up the steps where the last of the younger children was coming off. Then, as she sat cross-legged in the center of the stage, she glimpsed her parents. There were rising from the ground like openmouthed ghosts.

Amanda dropped the matches, lifted the gasoline can over her head, and turned it upside down. The fuel came out in gouts, and the can lurched. Amanda gasped as the first splash drenched her hair and face, but she closed her eyes for only a second. The gasoline was cold, and the fumes choked her, but she held on until her dress was soaked.

By the time she dropped the can, the people in the audience were yelling. Some were coming toward her. Amanda glanced to one side and saw her classmates standing on the steps. They looked like plastic dolls.

As she faced the audience again, she saw her parents struggling through a jumble of people and lawn chairs. She tore a match from the book and touched its head to the black strip on the cover.

The match caught with a sputter that Amanda heard over the shouting, and the flame blossomed like a yellow flower. It touched a fold of her dress, and the world became a blaze of gold.

There were shadows beyond the wall of that world, moving like fish seen from the surface of a lake on a sunny day. She wondered what they were.

When Amanda's parents began planning their separation that winter, they stopped taking her to the psychologist in Grand Island. They needed their money for lawyers.

Amanda hadn't like the psychologist, but he had been better than the medical doctors. They had poked and probed and drawn blood, and then all they had said was that it must have been sweat. Sweat, they said, was what protected the feet of firewalkers.

None of them really knew why she had failed. Neither did she, even

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though her classmates told her everything that had happened after she lit the match:

A man from the audience burned his hands slapping at the fire. Someone else tried to smother it with a blanket, but the blanket ignited. People ran around and screamed.

Finally Amanda's father threw a quilt that he had plunged into the tank at the dunking booth, and Amanda fell over as it covered her. Even then, she and the surrounding boards burned for a while.

Afraid to look at what Amanda might have become, her parents put another blanket over the ruined quilt and wrapped their daughter like a mummy. They took the bundle to the county hospital.

Amanda remembered what had happened next:

When a doctor and nurse cut away the blanket and rags, she gazed up at them. They stared back.

Her clothes and shoes were gone. So was her hair, including the wisps on her arms and legs. Her skin was smooth and pink.

She didn't even feel the sting that she would have felt from a sunburn. Her runny nose was cured.

Later, while leaving the hospital, she saw a man with white bandages on his hands. He was the one who had tried to slap down her flames. He hadn't even come within four feet of her before being driven back.

Amanda could only conclude that Jesus disliked her. She had tried to become a martyr, but trying had not been good enough. She would have to find out what was.

AMANDA'S MOTHER left Spring Hill on the day after New Year's, taking Amanda with her. Amanda's father wasn't home at the time. Outside, it was snowing, and Amanda helped brush off the car before getting in.

They moved to Sheldon, a town on the other side of Grand Island. Amanda's hair was almost as long now as it had been before the Summer Celebration, so no one at her new school or church would know that she had set herself on fire. That was fine with her. She didn't want to be reminded of her failure.

Amanda came to like life in Sheldon. For one thing, there was no more yelling. Her mother went to work at a bank every day while she was at school, and in the evenings they ate supper from TV trays and watched

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reruns of *M*A*S*H*. One weekend a month, Amanda stayed with her father in Spring Hill, and he taught her the rules of football. One Saturday in October, he took her all the way to Lincoln, and they saw the Cornhuskers beat Kansas 57 to 3. After the sixth touchdown, Amanda wrapped her hands around her father's neck and cheered.

Seven years passsed, and Amanda almost forgot about wanting to be a martyr. Then, in the summer that she turned fourteen, her father took his girlfriend to the Virgin Islands. Before leaving, he gave Amanda a leather-bound Bible with a concordance for a birthday present. She put it away in a drawer without opening it. The little Gideon New Testament she had been given at Sunday school in Spring Hill was good enough for her.

While her father was on St. Croix, her mother talked to her about sex. Amanda protested that she'd had a sex-education class in eighth grade, but her mother replied that what they were going to discuss wasn't covered in textbooks. The books might make it all seem quite clean, she said, but it wasn't. It was dirty and awful, and boys would use it to hurt Amanda if she let them. She was pretty, and boys liked to hurt things that were pretty. This was because Cain had killed Abel. Abel had been gentle, but when he died, it meant that all men would be descended from brutality.

Amanda would have to be good, or she would regret it.

Amanda promised that she would be better than good.

In Sheldon, being in ninth grade meant that Amanda went to high school. The biggest change was that her friends, all of whom were girls, wanted her to do more things after school hours. She would sometimes join them for movies or sleepovers, but she refused to attend school parties, dances, or even football games. There would be boys there.

She had no problems until May. Then, while she was walking home one afternoon, an older boy caught up with her and asked her to the prom. Amanda stammered that she didn't think she could go, but the boy suggested that she ask her mother. She turned down the wrong street to get away from him.

All that evening she tried to think of a way to tell her mother what had happened, but at eleven o'clock she went to bed without having said a word about it.

In the morning, three of Amanda's friends met her at her locker and

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said that she was the luckiest girl in school. Freshmen girls were hardly ever asked to the prom, and the boy who had asked her was athletic and popular.

Amanda told them that her mother wouldn't let her go, and that she didn't have a formal dress anyway. Her friends insisted that if her mother was inflexible, there were ways around it. Furthermore, a formal was no problem. One of the girls was Amanda's size, and she had a bridesmaid's dress that would be suitable.

For the next six hours, with notes and whispers, Amanda's friends tried to convince her. Again and again, she told them no. But after school, when the boy approached her, she said yes. The rest of the way home, she ached with the lies she would tell.

On Saturday evening, Amanda's date pulled his car away from her friend's driveway and steered with his elbows as he lit a cigarette. Amanda would have to wash her hair at her friend's house before going home in the morning. The boy offered her a cigarette, too, but she declined. Her voice sounded like that of a cartoon mouse.

The boy put his cigarettes and butane lighter in the glove compartment, and his hand brushed Amanda's bare arm. She flinched. As he took the car onto the highway and headed for Lincoln, he complimented her dress and her hair. She thanked him, but he seemed to be waiting for something else. Maybe she was supposed to compliment his clothes and hair, too. But that would be stupid, because he was wearing a rented blue tuxedo that was like any other, and his hair looked both stiff and greasy.

When Amanda and her date walked into the hotel ballroom, a huge, pimply boy asked them if they'd brought any Everclear. Amanda's date answered that it was in the back seat of his car, and the pimply boy told him to leave it there for now. The punch was already spiked, so they would save the extra bottle for the party afterward. Nobody had told Amanda anything about a party afterward.

Her date seated her at a table and brought her a plastic goblet of punch. She drank most of it before remembering what was in it. Then two more couples sat at the table and started talking to her date about a horror movie. Amanda hadn't seen it, so she looked at the decorations. Hundreds of silver stars were taped to the walls and suspended on threads from the ceiling. They looked as if they might fall and cut her.

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The lights dimmed, a rock band started playing, and Amanda's date asked her to dance. She didn't mind the fast songs, but during the slow ones, the boy pressed too close. When the third song started, she asked him to bring her another goblet of punch. This got him away for a while, so she did it twice more. By the time the band stopped, Amanda was dizzy.

Her date took her out of the hotel among a stream of other tuxedos and formal dresses. When they were in the car again, he asked if she wanted to go to the party even though she hadn't brought a change of clothes. He sounded as if he expected her to say yes. She told him that she was sorry, but that she didn't feel well. She hoped he understood and that she hadn't ruined his evening.

The boy smiled. Amanda hadn't ruined anything, he said. Of course he understood.

Amanda thanked him.

He moved closer and said that she didn't have to cry. He reached up and rubbed her cheek with his thumb.

Amanda wasn't crying, but she supposed it was possible, in the weak light, for the boy to mistake her perspiration for tears. She tried not to flinch from his thumb.

Then he was too close, and his mouth was over hers. She put her hands on his shoulders, thinking to push him away, but he only grasped her own shoulders and held her still. She stared at his forehead, where a third eye had appeared over his other two.

The boy's left hand went down inside the front of her dress. Amanda heard laughter and whistles, and she shoved the boy hard. He took his hand away and fell back, bumping his head on his window.

Through the windshield, Amanda saw three boys grinning at her. There were girls, too, hiding their mouths behind their hands.

Amanda unlatched her door. Her date rubbed the back of his head and asked what the big deal was.

She took his butane lighter from the glove compartment and grabbed a bottle wrapped in a paper bag from the backseat. The boy lunged toward her then, but she escaped outside. As she walked to the rear of the car, he got out and yelled at her.

She sat cross-legged on the cement, her hair brushing the car's bumper. She pulled the bag off the half-gallon bottle and twisted the cap, snapping the tax seal.

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Her date and several of his friends had gathered around her. Some were laughing, but others looked concerned. They said she was fucked up and should be taken home.

Amanda removed the cap and poured alcohol over her hair and her friend's dress.

Her date stepped forward and reached down to take the bottle away. It was almost empty, so she let him. Then she lit the butane lighter and brought the flame to a ruffle.

Her date and his friends vanished behind blue light.

The dress and stockings melted. Somewhere, somebody shouted about a gas tank, and the blue light was engulfed by a brilliant orange. A flake of ash whispered against Amanda's cheek, and she tried to follow it upward.

On Memorial Day, Amanda and her mother moved back to Spring Hill to live with her father again. Amanda rode with her father in the rental truck, and although he tried to make conversation, he didn't look at her. When they reached his expensive new house-with-a-swimming-pool, his English setter came out to meet them. Amanda stepped from the truck, and the dog ran behind the house.

At dusk, when Amanda tired of putting her things away, she went downstairs for a glass of juice. The smell of charcoal-grilled hamburgers drifted into the kitchen through a sliding screen. Amanda's father and mother were on the pinewood deck by the pool, and her mother was saying that she hoped her father knew she didn't really want to be here. She was doing it only because she couldn't deal with Amanda by herself anymore. She couldn't continue to sleep alone in the same house with a girl who looked like an alien from the cover of the *Weekly World News.* Amanda's father replied that Amanda would look fine when her hair grew back, and that her mother was being a bitch.

That was easy for him to say, Amanda's mother retorted. He hadn't had to live with the child all this time. He had been busy getting rich and committing adultery.

Amanda's father said it wasn't his fault that a certain person wouldn't give him a divorce.

The argument grew louder and louder, as had all of the arguments that Amanda remembered from when she was little. She left the kitchen without getting any juice, and went into the bathroom to stare at the mirror.

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She was bald, with a faint gray shade where her new hair would come in. Her brow ridges were naked and pale, making her eyes look like holes. No wonder the dog had run from her.

She looked like a corpse, but she was alive. Despite her virtue, Jesus had denied her again. It was some consolation, at least, that she had blown up her date's car.

Still not good enough for Heaven, Amanda sat on the toilet lid to wait. Sooner or later her parents would stop yelling at each other long enough to shout that the hamburgers were ready.

But when the yelling stopped, it was replaced by shrieks and by the dog's frantic yelps. Amanda ran out to the deck and found it ablaze. The charcoal grill had fallen over, and the bottle of lighter fluid had spilled. Amanda's mother was in the pool, screaming, and her father was dancing wildly among the flames. His "Barbecue Genius" apron was burning. On the other side of the pool, his dog was throwing a fit.

Amanda knew what had happened. The argument had become physical, and her father had started shoving. Her mother shoved back, and one of them had collided with the grill. Amanda considered leaving them like this.

But that might mean that they would become martyrs before she did.

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She dashed into the fire and shoved her father hard, like a Cornhusker tackle hitting a Kansas halfback. He stumbled across the deck and fell into the water beside Amanda's mother. His apron was snuffed out. The dog jumped in and swam to him.

As her parents floundered, Amanda sat on the deck so that her clothes would ignite. This time she watched the process carefully. The fire had not quite consumed all of the fabric, when her father came out of the pool with a plastic bucket and doused her. Soon he had extinguished the fire on the deck as well.

For the third time, the flames had done nothing more than kiss Amanda's skin.

She picked up a soggy hamburger from the blackened deck, and as she ate it, her father bellowed at her to get the hell to her room. She didn't know why he was angry with her, and she told him so. She had saved him, hadn't she? She could have let the whole place burn, couldn't she? After all, it wouldn't have hurt *her.*

But then, having said that, she followed his order. She heard her mother sobbing behind her.

* * *

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Still wearing her wet, charred rags, Amanda sat on her bed and pondered. She decided that she could understand why Jesus might have objected to her first and second attempts at martyrdom. The first time, she had done it solely for attention, and the second time, she had done it in a place where she should not have been. Such were probably not the ways of true martyrs.

But this third time had been different. She had kept her family from harm, and, except for them, she'd had no audience. Nor had she started the fire herself. What was Jesus' objection now?

She no longer had a Sunday school teacher, so there was only one place where she might find an answer. She dug out the leather-bound Bible her father had given her, and then used the concordance to guide her search.

Twenty minutes later she had her answer at last. It was the only one possible.

She was wheat.

Her parents, and most other people, were chaff.

It wasn't that Jesus disliked her. It was the opposite. Martyrdom was a worthy goal for mortals, but Amanda was beyond that.

Martyrs were mourned. Angels were exalted.

There was a knock at her door, and her parents opened it without waiting for permission. They stared at her rags.

Her father said that he was sorry for having yelled at her. She had done the right thing. He had just been worked up because of the situation, was all.

Amanda told him that she forgave him. For now. He frowned, but said nothing.

Then, in a voice like that of a cartoon mouse, Amanda's mother asked if there was anything she wanted.

Amanda smiled at them.

"You'll be the first to know," she said, and went back to her reading.

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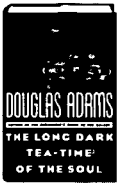

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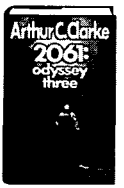

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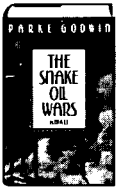

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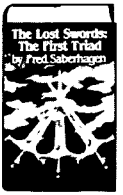

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